JUST SEVERAL MONTHS INTO THE PRIMARY SEASON, the 2020 presidential election is already breaking records. With the largest field of candidates yet, an earlier-than-ever start to campaigns and primaries, and key rule changes by the Democratic National Committee (DNC), this election stands apart from years past and brings with it a set of potential challenges. The role of the convention in the party nomination process has taken on renewed importance and we can plausibly question whether 2020 will hold the first brokered convention since 1952. The 2008 iteration of this “On To the Convention” article asked this same question, though Barack Obama ultimately won the nomination in early June after a close competition.1 The 2012 Republican and 2016 Democratic and Republican nominations brought similar warnings of multiple-balloted conventions. Each of these races ultimately avoided contest, however; Mitt Romney secured the Republican nomination in March 2012 after leading the race for weeks, and Bernie Sanders conceded the Democratic nomination to Hillary Clinton after a protracted race in May 2016. The 2020 Democratic primary, however, with the largest ever field of candidates, an altered primary calendar, a polarized Democratic base, and rule changes to the convention, looks to be the most likely yet to head to a decisive convention. The safer bet is that it will not, if 2008, 2012, and 2016 provide any lessons. But a plausible case can be made for a departure from these past election years.

1 This article is an updated version of Jason Bello and Robert Y. Shapiro's 2008 piece, “On To the Convention!,” which first appeared in Political Science Quarterly 123 (Spring 2008). The authors thank Loren Morales Kando and Marianna Palumbo for their work with us on this, and Marylena Mantas for her editing.
In analyzing the probability of a multiple-balloted Democratic convention for the 2020 election, we may gain insight into the role of the convention in the primary process. Is the convention still a relevant institution to determine the presidential candidate? What is the role of the convention in modern politics? Does the primary system serve as a democratic process to understand the party’s wishes, or is the convention instead an instrument to coalesce party unity and to express the will of the party establishment? In examining the history of the convention and the party delegate selection processes, we contend that the Democratic convention has the potential to reach multiple ballots, or at least a second ballot, while the Republican nomination looks to be set for Donald Trump (assuming any challenge will fall flat). The convention is ever ready to play a key role in the presidential election process, although parties seem to be undecided about the extent to which the convention should reflect a fully democratic primary process, which could ultimately change its function. In order to better understand the role of the convention and the possibility for multiple ballots, we first explore the history of the convention through rule changes and their effects on the system. We then provide an overview and analysis of the Democratic and Republican primary systems, and the potential each system provides for a contested convention. Finally, we explore the role of independent voters and independent candidates in the primaries and the general election process.

THE MODERN HISTORY OF THE PRIMARY CONVENTION
The late 1960s and early 1970s led to a sharp break in the primary process. Prior to this period, the primaries largely reflected party establishment wishes, rather than a democratic vote by the members of the party. Corruption ran rampant—each state party ran its primary with little or no oversight—and the candidates nominated often did not reflect the primary results. The 1968 Democratic convention was particularly emblematic of the problems within the system (the candidate who received the nomination had not won any primaries) and the results finally spurred party officials into action. The resulting commissions convened to change the system, the McGovern-Fraser Commission (1968) and the Mikulski Commission (1973), altered the number of delegates assigned to each state, required that the selection process be more transparent, and replaced winner-take-all systems with proportional systems. These reforms sought to democratize the electoral process and promote transparency for the primary elections. The 40 years since have seen a growth in the number of bound delegates, and each state’s delegate selection plan now undergoes public review and comment before finalization.

Although the push for transparency only occurred in the Democratic Party, the quantity of bound delegates in the Republican Party has increased
at the same rate as in the Democratic Party. Both parties now send approximately 80 percent of their delegates to the convention bound and 20 percent unbound. Unlike the Democratic Party, the Republican Party allows states to decide whether and how to allocate their delegates.

In many ways, this move to increase the number of bound delegates indicates a trend toward viewing the primary as a democratic process. For a race to be decided before reaching the convention, a candidate needs a supermajority of the pledged delegates, approximately 63 percent. If the ratio of unpledged delegates to pledged delegates is higher, then a larger supermajority is needed. During the 1968 Democratic convention, about half of the delegates were unpledged, which led to a non-democratic nomination made through brokered deals with unpledged delegates and ultimately sparked rule changes. In a further, more recent indication of a turn towards a more transparent and democratic process, the DNC rolled out new rules regarding the “superdelegates” (unbound delegates composed primarily of party officials and other party establishment) for the 2020 election. The inclusion of superdelegates in the nomination process has been long-debated in the Democratic Party. Initially introduced in 1982 as a response to the McGovern-Fraser Commission, which provided more power to the party base to decide on the nominee, the superdelegates were included to produce more “electable” candidates that had a stronger chance of winning the general election.2 Between 1984 and 2004, the superdelegates did not raise much controversy, as the nominations in that period were decided prior to the convention. In 2008, though, the issue was brought to the forefront with a close race between Hillary Clinton and Obama that could have hinged upon the superdelegates, with each candidate taking a stance on their legitimacy.3

Although Obama ultimately won the nomination just before the convention, the controversy resurfaced again in the 2016 primary. The DNC faced backlash from many Democrats who believed the establishment was backing Clinton over Sanders, and believed this to be exemplified by the party superdelegates that would primarily back her over Sanders (although it should be noted Clinton would have won the nomination regardless of the superdelegates’ votes).4 Party officials responded by eliminating the superdelegates’ voting power in the first round of balloting, though it was a contentious vote among DNC members—an indication of division among the

---

2 Dennis F. Thompson, “The Purpose of Presidential Primaries,” Political Science Quarterly 125 (Summer 2010): 221-222.
3 Thompson, “Purpose of Presidential Primaries,” 222.
party regarding how democratic the primary should be. Superdelegates will now vote in the second round of balloting if a nominee is not decided upon by the start of the convention. In a move that further constrains the democratization of the nomination process, however, the DNC has also been pressuring states to move from caucuses to primary systems. Primary systems generally benefit party establishment candidates, though some assert that caucuses are in fact less democratic than primaries, due in part to their lower voter turnout rate. Studies have indicated, however, that while there are slight differences in voter participation and representation on occasion, caucuses are not markedly more undemocratic than primaries.

After 1968, candidates’ “momentum” also grew to play a strong role in the outcome of the nomination. Momentum indicates the boost of support that candidates receive from early primary wins. It can indicate a candidate’s likelihood of winning the nomination, which is proven to have an impact on voters’ choices, and generate media coverage and positive narratives that resonate with voters. Early primary races are very impactful due to the momentum they can confer, with states like Iowa and New Hampshire attracting considerable attention. The momentum phenomenon will be somewhat blunted in the 2020 primary election process, however, as many states are moving their voting schedules earlier (California and Texas, in addition to other states, have already moved their primary races up to Super Tuesday, on March 3). After Super Tuesday, nearly 37 percent of Democratic delegates will be allocated and by the end of March, 64 percent of Democratic delegates will already be bound to candidates. This front-loading lessens the possibility for momentum for one candidate to build over time, with each states’ contest affecting the other.

The earlier primary date for California and Texas have the potential to affect Kamala Harris and Beto O’Rourke’s momentum in particular—if either wins their home states, they will receive a consequential delegate boost as well as accompanying legitimacy and media coverage of their campaigns. A loss could deal them an early knockout blow, however, as they are both in

---

7 Costas Panagopoulos, “Are Caucuses Bad for Democracy?” Political Science Quarterly 125 (Fall 2010): 441.
precarious middling positions as of the September 2019 polls. Elizabeth Warren’s home state of Massachusetts is equally key to the success of her campaign. If former Vice President Joe Biden, the current leader in the polls (as of this writing, September 2019), dominates Iowa and New Hampshire, other candidates might find it hard to make up for the momentum and delegate count the states would accord him.\(^\text{10}\) Alternatively, if Biden does not win either state, it could be difficult for him to stage a comeback after such a blow—though Larry M. Bartels has found that momentum has a lesser effect on a race between well-known candidates than on a race between unfamiliar candidates.\(^\text{11}\) Momentum can diminish the role of the convention as a deciding instrument, then, by helping build a supermajority for one candidate and rendering the party rules for the no-majority convention process moot. Momentum alone does not guarantee the nomination, however. Many candidates, including John McCain in 2004, Gary Hart in 1984, and George H.W. Bush in 1980, received a momentum boost only to peter out and later leave the race.\(^\text{12}\)

Endorsements from party officials can also contribute to a candidates’ success (some argue more so than momentum).\(^\text{13}\) In an analysis of the 2012 election, John Sides and Lynn Vavreck emphasized that the three fundamentals to succeeding in the primaries are endorsements from party leaders looking to back the best candidate, strong fundraising, and competency in organizing a long campaign.\(^\text{14}\) These fundamentals to success, along with momentum, are key in understanding whether the convention is a relevant decision-making institution for party establishment, or whether it is rendered unnecessary by a democratic primary process. To fully understand the intricacies of momentum and other factors that lead to victory, however, it is important to discuss the basic rules of delegate selection. Each party has very different rules regarding how delegates are selected. The Democratic system is unique in its central control and proportional system.\(^\text{15}\) The Republican Party, in contrast, only sets the number of delegates for each state and gives states the power to determine their own voting systems.

\(^{10}\) Kondik, “The Democratic Nomination.”
\(^{15}\) Bello and Shapiro, “On To the Convention!,” 3.
THE DEMOCRATIC DELEGATE SELECTION SYSTEM: CENTRALIZED, PROPORTIONAL—AND “DEMOCRATIC”? 
All Democratic primary races, whether elections or caucuses, have different types of delegates: district-level pledged delegates, at-large (state-level) pledged delegates, pledged “add-on” delegates (this allows for party leaders and elected officials to be represented), and unpledged delegates (superdelegates).16 Pledged or “bound” delegates are allocated to candidates proportionally after they reach at least 15 percent of the vote. District level delegates, who constitute by party rules 75 percent of all committed delegates, are awarded based on the results of the district vote, while at-large and pledged party leader delegates, 25 percent of committed delegates, are distributed following the results of the statewide vote. The unpledged groups (unpledged party leaders) do not have to declare who they will vote for until the convention.17 In the past, however, they have announced their endorsements long prior to the convention, which has provided boosts to candidates in their primary races.

With the updated DNC rules, these superdelegates will only vote if the convention enters a second round of balloting, or if a candidate already has a supermajority that equals a majority of all pledged and automated delegates (superdelegates) to the convention. This change, however, instead of making the convention a more democratic, transparent process, as the intention seemed to be, runs the risk of having the opposite effect. If the convention does indeed hold a second round of balloting, then all delegates will become unpledged. The result could be a less democratic nomination process, involving negotiations and politicking, that party leaders hoped to avoid by instating the superdelegate constraints. If Democrats at the convention were to use a direct voting procedure to determine a nominee, they might consider, for example, a ranked voting system that would direct delegates whom to vote for if the candidate they are initially bound to drops out of the race or the race moves to multiple ballots. In the absence of ranked voting, delegates could commit to voting for the candidate who had the most wins in the primaries, as they are more representative of “the will of the people.” A second round of voting at the 2020 convention threatens to unleash a frantic wave of politicking on behalf of the candidates in the running though, rendering it a true “brokered” convention behind back doors hearkening back to pre-1968 conventions.

Some candidates are already preparing for such a convention by hiring consultants to manage delegate relations, including Harris, who has hired a former Clinton consultant who helped rewrite the DNC rules and will work to build

---

17 Bello and Shapiro, “On To the Convention!,” 4.
relationships with delegates early on. Sanders’ team has been working to gather superdelegate support as well. In contrast to what occurred in 2016, Sanders can now count a growing number of superdelegates among his alliances, as his initial campaign inspired many individuals to run for party office who now find themselves in the role of superdelegates. In the case of a contested convention, these superdelegates could provide pivotal support for Sanders. One of the new DNC members who ran for party office after volunteering on Sanders’ 2016 campaign declared, “If it goes to a second ballot, we come roaring back in.” Past support is not a guarantee of support at the 2020 convention, however, and some Sanders-affiliated superdelegates have stated they will keep an open mind. Jeff Berman, a strategist for Obama in 2008 and Clinton in 2016, warned that if multiple candidates continue their candidacies far into the primary calendar, competition for the delegates could become quite intense. “It could be like ‘Lord of the Flies,’” he remarked.

Given these updated rules for the Democratic Party’s delegate selection system, we return to the original question of whether the race will in fact reach multiple ballots. The historic number of candidates in the running (20 as of early September 2019) contributes to the high likelihood of the convention moving to a second round of voting. Candidates tend to jump into a race when there is a greater chance of their party winning—this was the case with the 2016 Republican nomination, when discontent with the Obama administration increased the possibility for a Republican win in the general election and the field grew crowded. Democrats have an opportunity in 2020 to succeed in the general election given that Trump is viewed by many as a flawed candidate. The influx in candidates can be then linked to the Democrats’ potential to win in 2020. Costs are also not particularly prohibitive to stay in the race for a great many delegates. In the past, candidates only needed to raise enough money to support their campaigns through the South Carolina primaries. They could drop out if they did not do well enough to prove their viability or raise sufficient funds. In 2020, the more decisive March 3 Super Tuesday of primaries occurs just four days after South Carolina (and there may be early voting before this in some of these states), so that many candidates may still be in play in the large number of significant early primaries.

18 Ball and Elliott, “The Biggest Field Yet.”
20 Wilson and Cullen, “Sanders shores up Dem superdelegate support.”
21 Wilson and Cullen, “Sanders shores up Dem superdelegate support.”
One new dynamic with this early packed day of major primaries is the speed—indeed *viral* nature—of the online media covering campaign events, which candidates know they can greatly benefit from. This has, arguably, made early campaigning for the Iowa caucuses somewhat less imperative. The candidates can reach Iowans and especially the March 3 state electorate through digital media as well as through cable and the mainstream media.23 However, the intense spotlight of media attention that Iowa will receive remains so compelling that most candidates must campaign there, and then roll further into the next races in New Hampshire and the other early states.

The resulting high number of candidates dividing the delegate count is important, as candidates in the past have won the nomination prior to the convention if the difference between the delegate counts of the top two candidates were more than approximately 20 percent, which assumes uncommitted delegates are in play.24 If many candidates divide delegate allocations, the likelihood increases that no candidate will have a 20 percent lead.25 The 15 percent vote threshold for delegate allocation is relatively attainable for more than two candidates,26 and may not likely thin the candidate field enough to avoid a crowded race. With delegates allocated proportionally after candidates reach 15 percent and with a rather divided Democratic Party, there is potential for the party to arrive at the convention without a nomination. Nate Silver of FiveThirtyEight at the outset put this probability at around 50 percent, “maybe higher.”27

A brokered convention is far from certain at this point in the race, however. Silver points out that the field can sometimes thin quickly leading up to the first primaries or caucuses. In 2000, for example, 12 candidates sought the Republican nomination, but many dropped out before the primaries and the race quickly narrowed down to George W. Bush and McCain.28 In 2004, John Kerry excelled in the early state primaries and quickly rose to the top of a crowded field.29 Silver says these instances are exceptions, however, asserting that size generally indicates “higher-than-usual risk of chaos.”30 Party endorsements, early primary results, and the momentum they convey, may narrow the pool yet, though; superdelegate

---

29 Silver, “Everyone’s Running.”
endorsement early in the race could provide momentum to some candidates and affect voter behavior, and costs to continue in the race could become prohibitive for some candidates. A study of attrition rates between 1980 and 2004 found that poll standings, fundraising, early primary results, occupational background, and the primary schedules all had an effect on attrition and the length of candidacies.\textsuperscript{31} The new 2020 election DNC thresholds for candidates to participate in party debates (a polling minimum, an individual donor minimum, as well as a 20-candidate cap)\textsuperscript{32} will also all but eliminate those who are excluded from the debates. Of the current estimate of 20 Democratic candidates, at least four of them as of September 2019—Biden, Sanders, Warren, and Harris—have polled frequently enough in double digits in national polls or at least one early primary state’s polls, so that there could be a big split in the delegate counts early on.\textsuperscript{33}

Biden’s entry into the race in late April and subsequent jump to the top of the polls might, however, translate into a sweep of the early primaries or lead to a race between Biden and a select few other candidates.\textsuperscript{34} Biden’s early lead does not necessarily confirm a clinched nomination, though. At this point in the 2008 contest, for example, Clinton led the polls for the Democratic nomination by 13 percent, and Rudy Giuliani led the polls for the GOP nomination by 8 percent.\textsuperscript{35} The front-heavy primary schedule will either facilitate an early-leader, or incite chaos with no one or two candidates emerging with a clear advantage, and a large percentage of the delegates divided among a wide array of candidates early in the race.

A contested convention or long primary race does not portend well for the Democratic Party. V.O. Key warned of the danger of contested conventions back when they were more frequent, noting that while “the task of the convention is to unite the party in support of a presidential candidate,” sometimes, “animosities […] reach such intensity that deadlock ensues and whatever party unity is achieved by the convention is a mere façade.”\textsuperscript{36} Pew Research Center has found that statistically, candidates who are nominated after a long nomination battle at a convention are less likely

\textsuperscript{31} Norrander, “The Attrition Game,” 499.
\textsuperscript{33} For the latest election polls, see https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/latest_polls and https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2020-primaries/democratic.
to win the presidential election.\(^{37}\) Between 1868 and 1984 (the last time there was high potential for a brokered convention), 18 total candidates were nominated by their parties after multiple ballots. Of those, only seven were elected president. Among Democrats, nominees who were appointed following the first ballot won the presidential election 45 percent of the time. When the nomination ran to a second ballot, however, that number dropped to 30 percent of the time.\(^{38}\) Intra-party divisions created by a contested convention may play a role in this trend. Bartels confirms this in warning that party infighting can “seriously tarnish a nominee’s image and precipitate defections from the party ticket in the general election.”\(^{39}\)

**THE REPUBLICAN DELEGATION SELECTION SYSTEM: STATE AUTONOMY, MULTIPLE SYSTEMS, AND WINNER-TAKE-ALL**

The Republican nomination system decreases the likelihood of a brokered convention by allowing states to choose whether to allot delegates proportionally or through a winner-take-all system. States create their own selection plans, which results in a combination of winner-take-all and proportional systems. New Hampshire, for example, allocates its delegates proportionally, while other states such as New Jersey provide all delegates to the winner. Arkansas institutes a winner-take-all approach when a candidate wins over 50 percent of the vote (a “winner-take-most” system).\(^{40}\) As discussed earlier, the ratio of bound to unbound delegates is similar to that of the Democrats. However, while the Democrats have divided their unbound delegates among states relatively evenly, Republican state parties can make all their delegates bound or unbound.\(^{41}\)

While some Republican state parties have moved towards proportional systems, the number of purely proportional states is currently at 13, and has not exceeded half over the past few decades.\(^{42}\) State parties are not required to submit their delegate selection plans until after candidates have announced, which allows them to alter their system to benefit their own interests.\(^{43}\) If states are seeking the attention of all the candidates as well as the media that accompanies them, they might choose a proportional system.

---

37 DeSilver, “Contested presidential conventions.”
38 DeSilver, “Contested presidential conventions.”
41 Bello and Shapiro, “On To the Convention!,” 5.
43 Bello and Shapiro, “On To the Convention!,” 5.
The two most-watched early states, New Hampshire and Iowa, allocate delegates according to a proportional system.\(^{44}\) If a state has strong regional ties to a candidate, it might provide that candidate with a boost by implementing a winner-take-all system.\(^{45}\) Some have argued that Massachusetts, which changed its delegate allocation to a winner-take-all system from a proportional system this year, is seeking to protect Trump from an insurgency from Bill Weld, the challenger for the Republican nomination.\(^{46}\) The Republican system can thus help protect against challenges to the party incumbent, although Trump’s support has also been very strong among his Republican base (at the 90 percent level),\(^ {47}\) which helps diminish the chances of Weld posing a threat.\(^ {48}\) (Still, given the level of criticism of Trump, turmoil in his administration, and relatively low approval rating at this writing, despite a thriving economy and accomplishments he can claim credit for,\(^ {49}\) we can ask, what if Weld were by some chance to win the New Hampshire Primary? And with California coming up?)

Political analysts have long agreed that winner-take-all systems (over half of the Republican states) foster and amplify a front-runner’s rise.\(^ {50}\) Candidates who are behind the front one or two candidates may find they are unable to close the delegate gap if they lose early winner-take-all races.\(^ {51}\) This promotes the emergence of a front-runner, and minimizes the probability of a contested convention that the Democrats are at higher risk of, given their proportional system. Although pundits warned that the crowded Republican field might result in a contested convention in 2016 (a record 17 candidates entered the competition), the winner-take-all system ultimately allowed Trump to receive the nomination in May, more than two months before Sanders formally conceded support to Clinton.\(^ {52}\) Some argue that had the 2016 Republican primary been run according to the Democratic primary rules, there would have almost certainly been a contested convention.\(^ {53}\) While the mixed winner-take-all system does not guarantee an uncontested convention and Republican races have become increasingly crowded, the system

---

\(^{44}\) Bello and Shapiro, “On To the Convention!,” 5.

\(^{45}\) Bello and Shapiro, “On To the Convention!,” 5.


\(^{47}\) See https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/06/05/trump-says-he-has-all-time-record-approval-among-republicans-he-ranks-sixth/?utm_term=.73d8e5c52d4a4.


\(^{49}\) See https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/president_trump_job_approval-6179.html.

\(^{50}\) Bello and Shapiro, “On To the Convention!,” 5.

\(^{51}\) Bello and Shapiro, “On To the Convention!,” 5.

\(^{52}\) Wasserman, “Trump May Have an Unlikely Re-election Ally.”

\(^{53}\) Wasserman, “Trump May Have an Unlikely Re-election Ally.”
does tend to winnow the race and favor a front-runner emerging. Whether the Republican system reflects party establishment wishes or a democratic process may be debated; while the mixed winner-take-all system could be seen as less democratic than the proportional approach, Trump’s nomination calls into question previous scholarship that asserted party elites play a large role in determining the nominee in presidential primaries. Although Trump was not initially the choice of the party, the support of his base through the winner-take-all primaries helped propel him to the nomination regardless. While the winner-take-all approach may be less democratic than a proportional voting method that provides more weight to more voters’ choices, it is still possible for a candidate to overcome party resistance in the Republican primary to secure the nomination through support from the party base, as evidenced by Trump’s success.

INDEPENDENT VOTERS

A critical issue in delegate selection rules is the role of independents in the voting process. Each state party decides whether to allow voters who are registered as independents to participate in its primaries. Decisions to include independent voters in the primaries can have an impact on primary results; closed primary states convey an advantage to candidates who are party insiders, while open primary states are more favorable to moderate or outsider candidates. This was clear in the 2016 primary race between Sanders and Clinton, particularly in New York, a closed primary state, where many independent voters expressed outrage at being excluded from participation in the Democratic primary. Sanders, as an outsider to the party establishment who would typically benefit from independent votes in the primary, heavily criticized this closed primary model. The timing of these open, closed, or modified primaries also has an effect on candidate success—many of the early voting states are open, which sets expectations for later closed races based on results in states where independents were allowed to participate. This could bring about a momentum boost for party-insider candidates who are expected to perform badly in the later races based on the early open state results, but who


57 Bello and Shapiro, “On To the Convention!,” 7.
do better than expected in the later closed states.\textsuperscript{58} Independent voter eligibility could play a role in the 2020 primaries, as Trump-challenger Weld could be buoyed by independent votes.

Figure 1 and Figure 2 are maps that summarize the rules in each state. The Republican map includes the delegate selection rules and those regarding the participation of independents. Because the Democrats, as described earlier, allocate delegates proportionately in each state, the map for Democrats reports only whether independents are permitted to vote.

Independent candidates, in addition to independent voters, are also historically viewed as a barrier to the success of the two main parties. Following the 2016 election, Clinton apportioned partial blame to Jill Stein of the Green Party for her loss.\textsuperscript{59} She states in her book that the Stein voters very well could have swung the vote in key states and connects her role to that of Ralph Nader in Florida and New Hampshire in 2000.\textsuperscript{60} While Nader and Stein’s roles in election loss have been disputed, the potential remains for independent candidates to pull voters from party bases. Howard Schultz,

\textsuperscript{58} Bello and Shapiro, “On To the Convention!,” 7.
CEO of Starbucks, has entered the 2020 race as an independent, catering to more conservative Democrats in a move that might split votes from the Democratic Party. Democratic strategists, including Dan Pfeiffer and Andrew Feldman, sounded alarm bells when Schultz announced his candidacy, asserting his entrance into the race could divide Democrats and all but ensure a Trump win. An independent candidate in the race could potentially further foment a crisis in the Democratic base. If the Democratic convention is contested and reaches a second ballot, the likelihood is higher that some Democrats, disenchanted with the result and with the Party following a long, divisive primary season, might abandon the eventual nominee and vote for an independent candidate.

THE CONVENTION—RALLYING MOMENT OR DEMOCRATIC PROCESS?

The 2020 Democratic convention could well be headed towards contestation unless Biden or one of the other candidates breaks out far ahead after the initial Democratic debates. The unique combination of the largest field of candidates yet, an earlier voting calendar that could stunt candidates’ momentum, new superdelegate voting rules, and an ideologically divided base

61 Siders, “Democrats trash Howard Schultz 2020 float.”
could combine to result in multiple ballots at the convention. It is early still in the primary process, however; only the first three debates have been held, and the race is just underway. Additional candidates could drop out prior to Iowa and New Hampshire, or soon after, and narrow the field enough that a contested convention would be avoided. If the convention does reach a second ballot and the superdelegates are involved in deciding the nominee, trouble could ensue for the Democratic Party’s already divided base as the general election begins.

The convention is far from a technicality, then, as it will likely play a key role in the 2020 Democratic primary. The parties seem to be still undecided on the role of the convention, however. Whether the convention should be a moment for the party to rally support behind a party establishment candidate or whether it should be a democratic process remains unclear. As the convention has become slightly more democratized, the parties are confronted with the question of whether the convention should serve as a moment for party establishment to put an “electable” nominee in place, or if the party is committed to putting the nomination in the hands of the people (with the potential that they will choose a non-viable candidate). Many scholars have put forth propositions to alter the primary system to render it more democratic, with voters at the forefront of the decision process making informed choices about the candidates.62 The Republican process is more clearly a moment for party unity around a candidate, with its mixed winner-take-all and proportional system that facilitates an early front-runner with the nomination decided upon before the convention. While the DNC has ostensibly moved towards a democratic process with the 1968 rule changes, its exclusively proportional delegate selection system, and the partial elimination of the superdelegates, the superdelegates still remain and many critics recall that the party establishment paved the way for Clinton’s nomination in 2016. With a divided Democratic Party, the DNC will need to decide whether to commit completely to popular democracy in the primary process, in order to fully clarify the role of the convention for the party.

---