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The activists decide: the preferences of party activists in the 2016 presidential nominations

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ABSTRACT

One view of presidential nominations in the United States [Steger, Wayne P. 2007. "Who Wins Presidential Nominations and Why: An Updated Forecast of the Presidential Primary Vote." *Presidential Research Quarterly* 60: 91–97; Cohen, Marty, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller. 2008. *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Silver, Nate. 2016. "The Republican Party May Be Failing." *FiveThirtyEight*. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-republican-party-may-be-failing/>] claims that the support of political elites is causally related to success in the nomination. The mechanisms for this relationship include party activists, who follow the cues party leaders send and provide necessary support to candidates in primaries and caucuses. This mechanism has not been explicitly tested. This paper explores the preferences of party activists in light of the unified elite preferences among Democrats and the lack of such unity among Republicans. Some activists in each party resist the signals from elites, but the resistance is far less widespread in the Democratic Party, where party leaders exhibited consensus support for the eventual nominee.

1. Introduction

The conventional view of the 2016 nomination is that the Democrats got the candidate that Democratic leaders wanted, while Republicans got a candidate that Republican leaders feared.

At the same time, it is clear that a considerable part of the Democratic Party favored a different candidate, and an unignorable large part of the Republican Party voted for Donald Trump, enough that he won the nomination.

The election thus serves as a useful testing ground for theories related to the importance of party leaders in nomination politics, a view associated with *The Party Decides* by Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel and John Zaller (2008). This perspective would expect Hillary Clinton to be nominated but not Donald Trump.

One of the central contributions of *The Party Decides* and related works (Bawn et al. 2012) is a broader definition of what counts as "the party."

They emphasize that a party is anyone working together to coordinate and achieve the party's goals, whether they hold formal office or not. This is both an asset and a limitation. On the one hand, political parties in the United States are not hierarchically structured institutions, so it is misleading to focus on those in official power. At the same time, this move might be interpreted to sweep in anyone involved in politics, making "the party" no more than a synonym for "political actors."

This was not the authors' intention, but it still opens up an important unanswered question about the scope of the party and its influence. Elite preferences usually coalesce around a single candidate, but what if they do not? How are we to consider conflicts among such a large group of actors?

Empirical evidence on the preferences of party elites is generally operationalized by looking at elite endorsements (Steger 2007; Cohen et al. 2008; Silver 2016). But endorsements are only part of the process. The preferences of political elites influence outcomes both by shaping the field and by shaping the preferences of voters, donors and other key actors. Political activists are a potentially central part. Activists are more engaged with elite opinion, but they can also push back. They provide the labor force for political campaigns. This paper compares activist preferences with the preferences of those who endorse.

In both parties, the activists have similar preferences to party leaders, but with notable differences. Republican activists do not coalesce around any leader, but neither did party leaders who endorsed. Still, more activists are supportive of Donald Trump than are elites, and far fewer are supportive of Jeb Bush. Among Democrats, the activists follow the elites in backing Hillary Clinton, but there is much more support for other potential candidates, including Bernie Sanders, than among party leaders.

It is hard to test theories about party leader influence with only two cases, but the evidence sheds some light on why things went the way that they did in 2016. Republican Party activists were not as opposed to Donald Trump as party leaders were.

The following section discusses the implications of *The Party Decides* for what we should expect from party leaders and from activists. Section 2 and Section 3 report the patterns of support among leaders and activists, respectively. Section 4 compares those patterns, and Section 5 revisits the theory to discuss new directions for research.

2. Activists and party leaders in *The Party Decides*

The McGovern-Fraser reforms after the 1968 Democratic National Convention were widely thought to have shifted the control of presidential nominations from party leaders at the convention to rank-and-file party members participating in caucuses and primaries, where delegates to the convention are

selected (Polsby 1983). Party leaders, seeing this shift, reacted in various ways to retain influence. One line of argument (Cohen et al. 2008, hereafter CKNZ) holds that they have largely been successful. While the nomination decision is now made before the convention begins, party leaders have been able to influence the process to get the kind of candidate that they like.

According to CKNZ, party leaders worry that the caucuses and primaries not only allow for an outcome they would not prefer, they may even encourage one. Polsby had argued that the primaries would favor narrowly factional or personalistic candidates with an intense but perhaps not broad following. Such a candidate would win pluralities in early states, attracting more attention and surviving into later contests. But party leaders would prefer a more broadly acceptable candidate, someone who need not be anyone's first choice, but who was the second choice of many, and at least acceptable to the party generally. Polsby argued this sort of candidate relied on consensus-ratifying institutions like the convention. Without a convention, such a candidate was unlikely to beat a narrowly factional candidate.

Since the reforms went into place, only a few nominations have realized Polsby's fears. Neither George McGovern nor Jimmy Carter was the overwhelming choice of their party's leaders. But from 1980 until about 2004, both parties nominated precisely the sort of candidates that Polsby thought the parties would want but could not get.

CKNZ argue that party leaders avoided the fate Polsby warned them about by shaping the field informally, before any voting takes place. The book is a little agnostic on the mechanism of influence, proposing several. Party leader support can be a signal to partisan voters in the primaries, but it can also be a signal to other party activists and leaders, who in turn provide resources and support to favored candidates. Party leaders can also encourage and discourage strong candidates, shaping the field. CKNZ argue that all of these small nudges in favor of a preferred candidate can tip the scales in their direction, although they caution that these are indirect mechanisms that may not always be successful.

We might classify these nudges as falling into three categories. Those that work through voters, those that work directly on potential candidates and those that work through activists and other key political figures.

CKNZ provide some evidence of the first category in the book, for example, showing that partisan voters tend to support candidates in roughly the same proportions at elite endorsements, while independent voters tend not to reflect party elites (301).¹ As there are more partisan than independent voters in the primary electorate, their support is what matters. Evidence for

¹CKNZ also labor to demonstrate that elite endorsements are not driven by polling numbers, in an effort to rule out endogeneity in this relationship.

the second category is less systematic, but numerous candidates express interest in the job, sometimes even publicly, and yet refrain from running when party insiders fail to encourage them. In 2016, this is the account for Joe Biden among the Democrats and Mitt Romney among the Republicans.

Theoretically, the third category is complicated. The line between activists and party leaders is not a bright one, especially in a party as defined by *The Party Decides*. CKNZ include figures who work behind the scenes without official office. There is no doubt a range of influence, but CKNZ only account for this by weighting leaders by their importance to the party and their power within it (179–181).²

This implies that those at the bottom of the hierarchy are either less important than those at the top, or at least less central to their definition of “the party.” But a closer reading of the argument suggests that the different actors have different roles to play. Party leaders evaluate, vet and endorse candidates. Activists respond to those signals and become the labor force for the chosen candidates.³ In this way, the endorsements are more than just an independent variable. Publicly observable support for a candidate in the form of endorsements is part of the mechanism, because both voters and party activists need the signal to know what to do.

Since activists and leaders are playing different roles, it is worth noting that they have different incentives as well. The leaders have the incentives that CKNZ describe. They may want to be on the good side of the eventual nominee, but they also believe they can steer the process. They care a lot about who becomes president, and who is elevated by even an unsuccessful campaign.

Activists, insofar as they are also part of the party, may share these considerations. But they likely have less of a sense of efficacy, which means they may be more free to reflect their preferences and not strategy. And they may benefit more from joining the winning team early. Significantly for the theory, they will also be mindful of the interests of political leaders, particularly those in whose orbit they find themselves. This is a big part of why leaders may have influence over activists. The activists need to be on their side.

These diverging incentives augment the influence of party leaders over some activists, but they also free other activists to resist that influence. We should thus expect a noisy relationship between leaders and activists,

²Almost all of the empirical conclusions in the book do not depend on this weighting, although the weighting tends to make them stronger.

³Several narratives in the book fit this pattern. Candidates without elite support are not able to build local organizations, and are at a disadvantage in fights against those who do have local support. See especially 292–295.

particularly when (a) party leaders fail to send a clear and consistent signal or (b) when many activists independently do not agree with the signal they are receiving.

To understand this relationship, we need to separately measure the expressed preferences of party leaders and of party activists. It is not possible to get surveys of activists during the primaries for past contests, but we can compare activists in 2016 with the elite endorsements in 2016. Section 2 reviews the patterns in endorsements from 1980 to 2016, using the same weighting scheme used by the original authors. Section 3 explores the preferences over presidential nominees among activists.

3. Elite endorsements

I follow the procedures used by CKNZ to extend their dataset through 2016. This involves scouring LEXIS/NEXIS and other online sources for endorsements. CKNZ attempted to collect every knowable endorsement, using both online and print sources. They looked at national newspapers, local newspapers, searched on the names of sitting legislators, and otherwise attempted to find everything available.

In recent years, electronic sources make this search easier, but I still primarily relied on LEXIS/NEXIS, as well as publicly available lists of endorsements. As journalists and academics have become more interested in endorsements, lists are increasingly easy to come by. For 2016, this procedure is augmented by data collected by Boris Shor, who systematically looked for endorsements from state legislators specifically.

There is some risk that the shifting search criteria mean that we find more of the endorsements today than could be found for previous years. Indeed, the number of endorsements in each cycle is generally greater for recent cycles, although neither monotonically nor overwhelmingly. Some of this difference is theoretically meaningful, in that if it is easier for researchers to find endorsements, it is easier for contemporaries to hear about them. We should still be cautious about comparisons over time.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of endorsements from 1980 to 2016. (Data for 1980 to 2004 from CKNZ have been extended by the author.) The story from Figure 1 is that in most years, both parties overwhelmingly favor one candidate, and that candidate is the eventual winner. This is the basis of the argument in CKNZ, which looks more closely at the mechanisms and dynamics of insider support.

The panels in Figure 1 are all scaled to include ten candidates across, to highlight variations in concentration. Even in years when fewer candidates receive endorsements, there is no formal limit on candidate entry, and in some years, some unlisted figures even floated their names. That they are omitted indicates their lack of support from party elites.

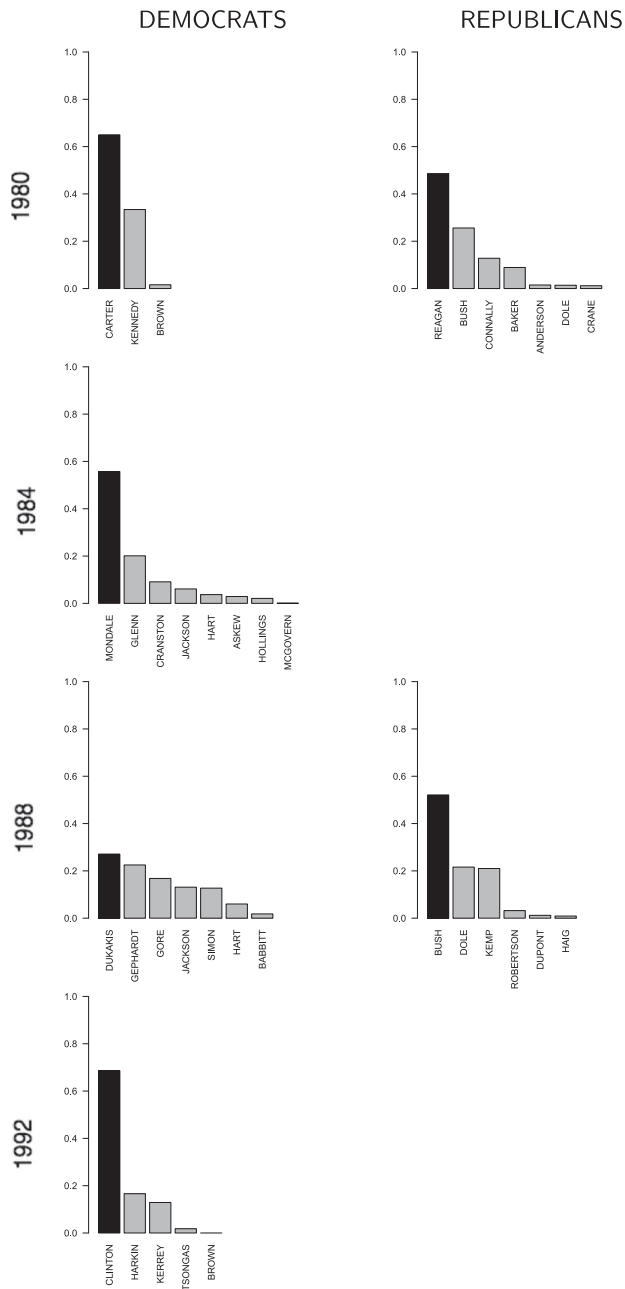


Figure 1. Distribution of endorsements, 1980 to 2016.

The Democrats in 2016 look very much like a model cycle from this perspective. Bernie Sanders and Martin O'Malley each have the support of some party leaders, but overwhelmingly the party leader support goes to Hillary Clinton.

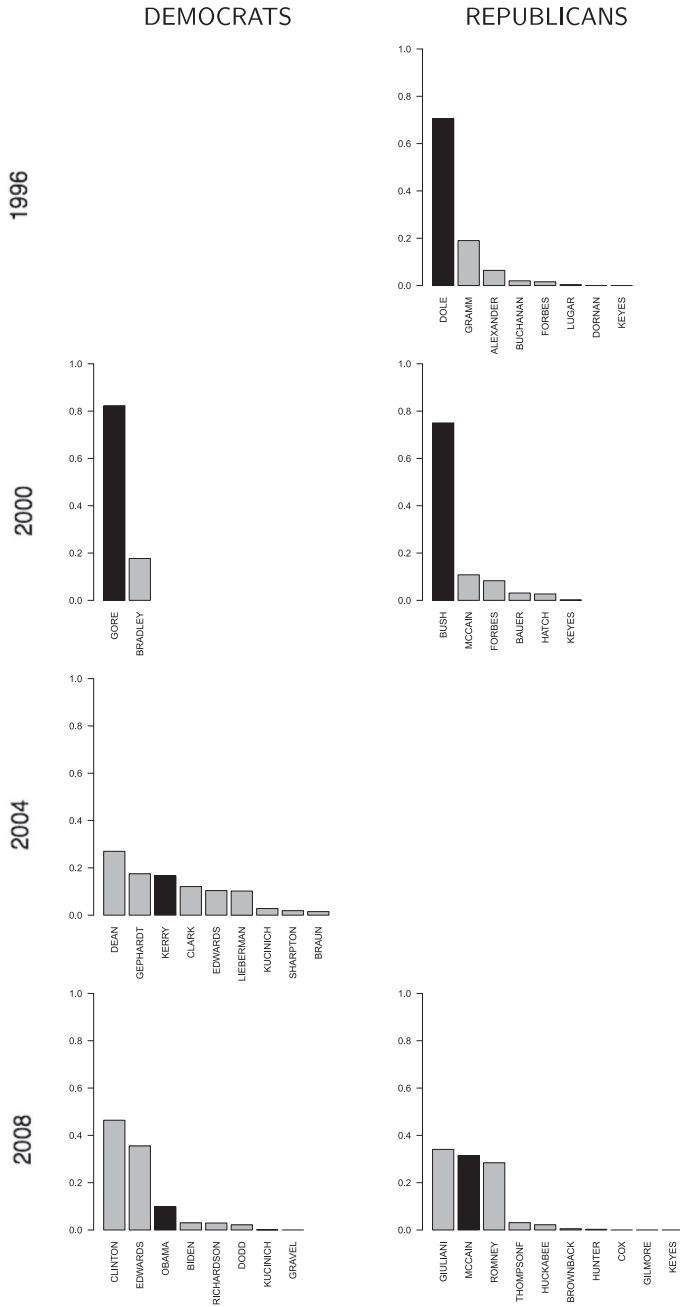


Figure 1 *Continued*

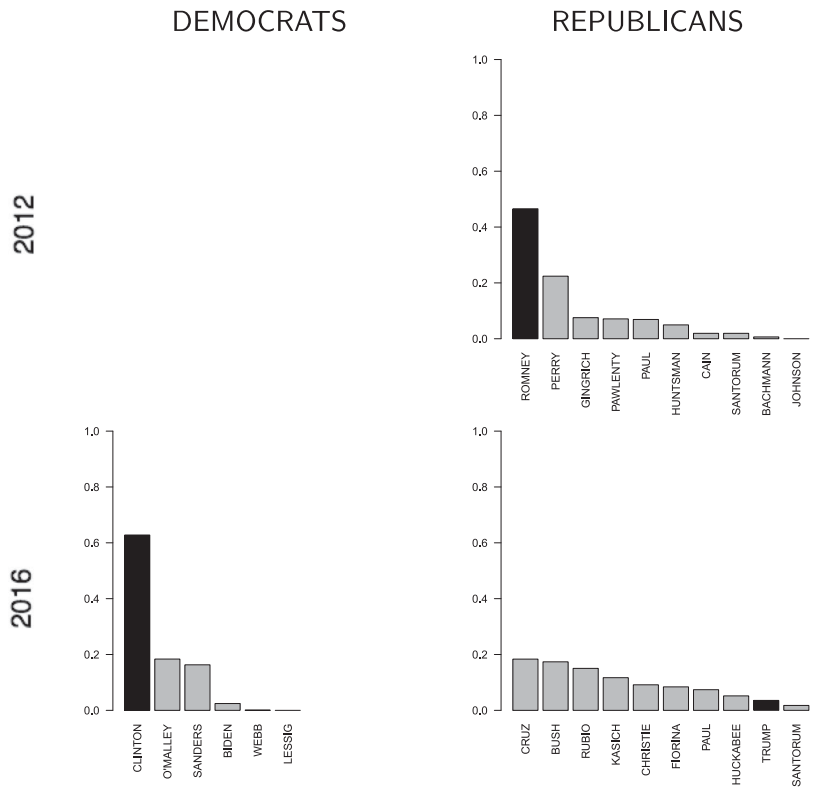


Figure 1 Continued

There are a few notable exceptions to the pattern in Figure 1, however. The Democrats in 1988, 2004 and 2008 do not uniformly prefer one candidate, and the Republicans are similarly divided in 2008 and 2016. One challenge for CKNZ, then, is what to make of these cases where division increases.⁴

The division among the Republicans in 2016 is an outlier even among divided cycles. No one is a clear leader. In third place is Sen. Marco Rubio, who is exactly the sort of candidate who both Polsby and CKNZ would argue the party would like. Rubio came to prominence with the wave of conservatives in 2010, presenting himself as the Tea Party alternative to mainstream Republican Charlie Crist. However, once elected, Rubio spent much of his time in the Senate attempting to build ties to the party establishment, staking out moderate positions on some issues. In other words, he was at least trying to appeal to all factions.

⁴They take up this question in Cohen et al. (2016).

But clearly not all factions found him appealing. The two candidates ahead of him are Sen. Ted Cruz and Gov. Jeb Bush. Cruz, like Rubio, made his national political name as a representative of the Tea Party, but unlike Rubio, Cruz made little effort to make friends with national politicians. On the other end, Bush had close connections among many in the party establishment, but he was widely disliked by the Tea Party wing of the party, which had developed after his brother's term in office. In other words, neither Cruz nor Bush was broadly acceptable. Not in a party increasingly dominated by movement conservatives and the Tea Party.

The question from the KKNZ perspective is why the party failed to coalesce. In other years, party activists who have had serious concerns about a candidate nevertheless were willing to compromise, rather than stick to supporting their own faction. The party backed the compromise candidate (such as Rubio) in other years, even when people had strong preferences for factional candidates (such as Cruz or Bush). But if the divisions between the Tea Party wing and the establishment wing of the Republican Party are significantly about differing views about compromise (Noel 2016) then perhaps it makes sense that this would be a case where compromise might not occur. In any event, the party did fail to coalesce.

4. Activists

The primary consumers of the messages from party leaders will be activists more than voters. One of the more convincing mechanisms of party influence in nominations is that party activists listen to their party leaders and then make decisions about whom to work for.

CKNZ lacked any independent measure of party activists, except insofar as some activists endorse. Here, I present a new source of data on party activist opinion, a survey conducted during the invisible primary by the Huffington Post via YouGov. In consultation with the author, the Huffington Post conducted three surveys of activists during the lead-up to the 2016 nomination process. The survey interviewed three separate samples of 500 Republicans and 500 Democrats on 8–12 July 2015, 22–28 September 2015 and 14–20 January 2016.⁵

To take the survey, potential respondents cleared a set of filter questions to determine if they were what I will define as activists. Survey respondents had two paths to get into the sample. First, they could say they had done at least two of the following:

- Contributed money to a political candidate.
- Attended a political campaign event such as a fundraiser or rally.

⁵Further surveys of these populations in July 2016 and October–November 2016 are not analyzed here.

- Done volunteer work for a political campaign.
- Made phone calls to voters asking them to support a political candidate.

Second, they could report having been at least one of the following:

- A paid staffer for a political campaign or an elected public official.
- A candidate for or someone who has held elected public office.
- An official in a political party (such as a local party chair or a precinct representative).

The activists in this sample thus clear a slightly higher bar than is often used to identify activists in mass surveys, such as the American National Election Studies. Those who qualify only through the first set of criteria (about 62%) report having done much more than wearing a button or placing a yard sign. The second criteria (about 38%) are themselves politicians whose endorsement might be tallied by CKNZ, albeit with a low weight and making up a small part of the sample.⁶

The activists were asked several questions about their preferences for their party's nomination for president. In addition to their first choice for the nominee, they were also asked about their second choice. And they were asked whether there were any candidate whom they could not support if they got the nomination. Finally, they were asked who they thought was most acceptable to people in their party.

Asking these multiple questions helps to get more directly at the concepts CKNZ are interested in.

The activists' first choice (see [Figure 2](#)) is the most analogous to an "endorsement," but it is not quite the same. An endorsement represents a potentially influential choice, more like a vote than a survey answer. Moreover, the first choice is not the most important concept for party nominations. The problem that Polsby was concerned about was the nomination of someone who had intense first-choice support but little second-choice support. Or, as Abraham Lincoln (1894) described his own attempt to build broad appeal for the nomination,

I suppose I am not the first choice of a very great many. Our policy, then, is to give no offense to others – leave them in a mood to come to us if they shall be compelled to give up their first love.

In the modern system, candidates drop out even before the first voting, and some activists may well vote or even campaign strategically. Thus, asking their second choice gives a richer picture of candidate support.⁷

⁶There are some small but notable differences between the two groups. Those who get in by the second criteria look, as a group, seem to behave a little bit more like the party leaders in Section 2 than the first group, but the differences are minor.

⁷"If you had to choose one, which ONE of these individuals would you want to be the Democratic nominee for president in 2016?" and "And which of these individuals would be your SECOND CHOICE?" Respondents are given the list of candidates for each question.

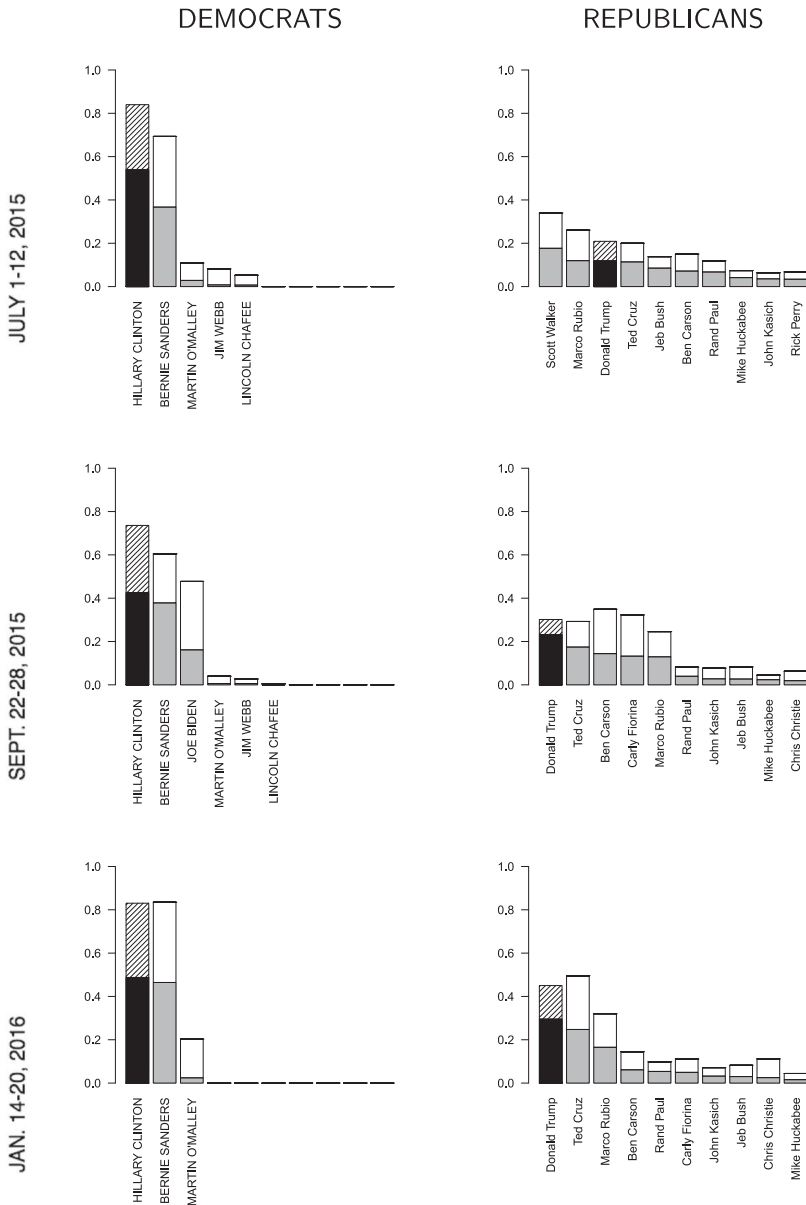


Figure 2. First and second choices of party activists.

Going one step further, the survey asked respondents to indicate if there were any candidates whom they could not support at all.⁸ These are presented

⁸Are there any individuals on this list that you could NOT SUPPORT under any circumstances? Please select ALL THAT APPLY." Respondents are then given the list of candidates. This item is scored in the direction of *support* in this analysis.

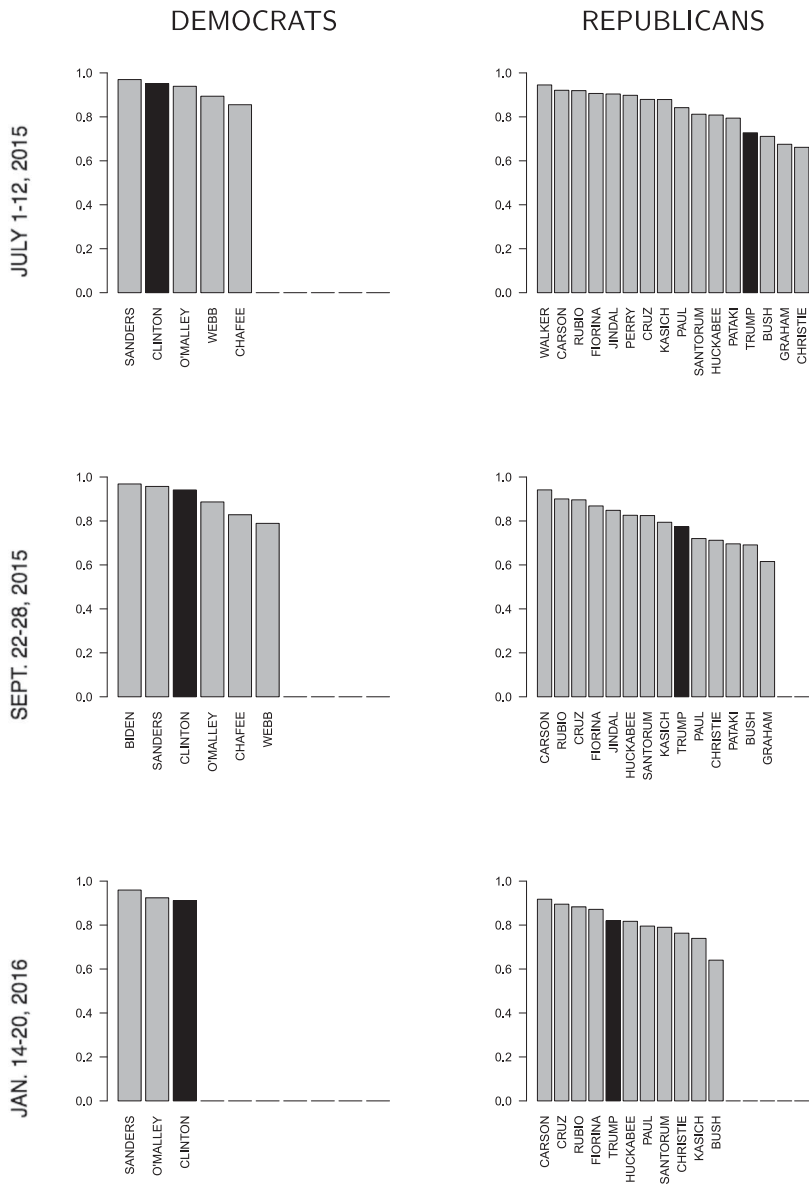


Figure 3. Acceptable to party activists.

in Figure 3. This may come closest to the criteria that party leaders hope to satisfy, although it does not help to distinguish which broadly acceptable candidate will be nominated.

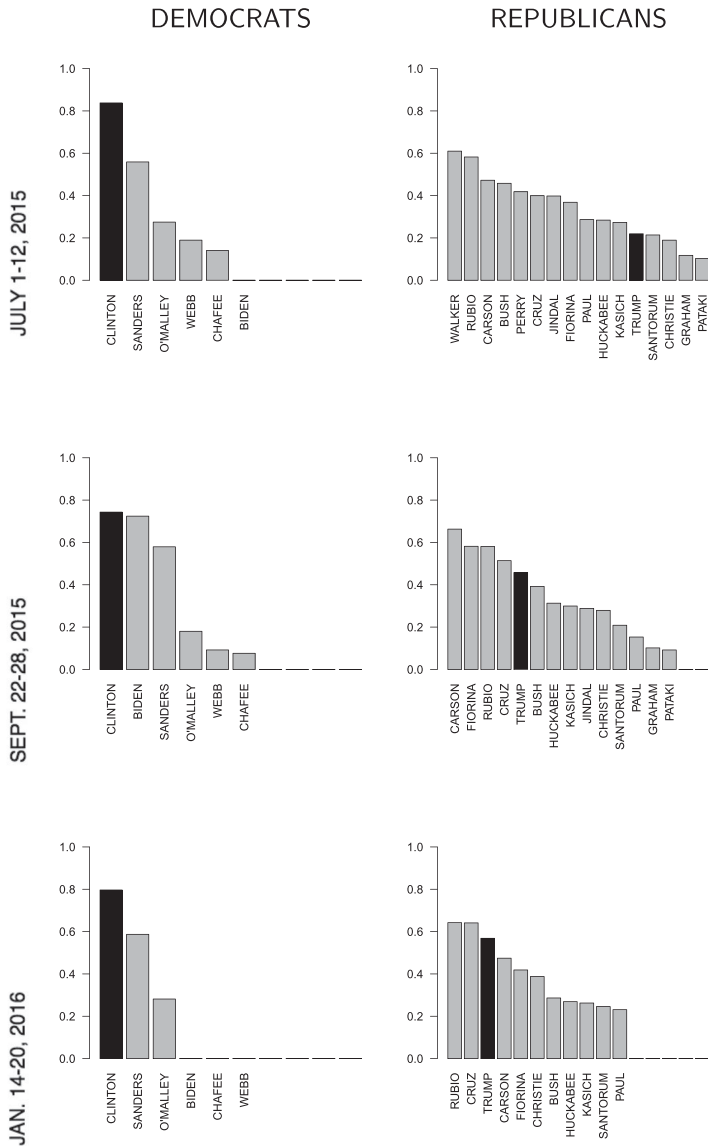


Figure 4. Perception of acceptability with the rest of the party.

Finally, respondents are asked the sociotropic question about broad acceptability within the party⁹ in Figure 4. The item does not specify party

⁹"And regardless of who you personally would support, which of these candidates would be ACCEPTABLE TO MOST DEMOCRATS if nominated? Please select ALL THAT APPLY." Respondents are then given the list of candidates.

leaders or rank-and-file members, so respondents are free to interpret the question as they see fit. But this question probably captures the signal from party leaders. If party leader influence works by conveying a sense that a candidate is or is not acceptable to the party, then respondents should reflect that signal in the response to this question.

The endorsements data are aggregated over the entire pre-primary period, but we have cross-sections of the activists at three times. The first is in July of 2015, when the contests were fairly wide open. Donald Trump announced his candidacy only three weeks earlier, on 16 June 2015. The second is in September, after a number of debates. The third is on the eve of the Iowa Caucuses. It is reasonable to imagine that even activists are becoming more engaged and more informed over the course of this period. The party leader endorsements are also rolling out over this period.

In both parties, there are similarities with the party elite signals, but also very significant divergences. The biggest similarity is that the party leaders have set the agenda for the activists. There are as many as 16 candidates with some support among Republicans, while Democrats have only six. These reflect the names provided the respondents. While an "other" option was provided, few used it.

This itself is a way that the party leaders influence activist and mass choices. A complete lack of elite support tends to keep candidates out of the race, and thus pollsters are unlikely to ask about them.

Beyond that, however, there is a minor but significant deviation in the preferences of the activists from the endorsements of party leaders. This is perhaps less surprising for Republicans, who never received a clear signal in the first place.

In January 2015, the leading choice of Republican activists was Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, who had few elite endorsements. Walker did have a number of early endorsements, but many politicians were still on the sidelines when Walker suspended his campaign on 21 September 2015, the day before the second round of the survey went into the field. Walker is definitely the sort of candidate who we might expect the party to favor. Ideologically acceptable to movement conservatives, he had also won multiple elections in purple-state Wisconsin. So it is not surprising that our activists liked him. Had party leaders gone for him, he would likely not have been resisted.

Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz, two of the candidates with a lot of party leader support, also do well in the survey, especially early on. Rubio, in particular, seems like a choice activists could be brought around to. As noted in the previous section, Rubio seemed to be the candidate with the best chance of uniting the Tea Party and establishment wings of the party. If party leaders had gone in that direction, the activists seem like they would not have resisted.

They probably also would not have resisted Cruz, who was greatly disliked by many party leaders, but he was loved by others. But Jeb Bush, who was also liked by some and disliked by others, has much less support among the activists. Without Trump, it is possible that the party would have found itself in a conflict between the party establishment backing Bush and Tea Party insurgency led by Cruz or Rubio. In such a case, it seems unlikely that party activists would have sided with Bush.

But Trump was present, and the biggest difference between elites and activists is in his support. In July, when Trump was a new candidate, the reality television personality had as much support as Cruz, and more than everyone but Walker and Rubio. By September, he is a narrow leader.

A relatively large number of respondents indicate that they could not support Trump, more than most candidates. But still, the percent of respondents not saying they could not support Trump rises from 72.7% in July 2015 to 77.4% in September and then to 82.0% in January 2016. A fifth to a quarter of the respondents not supporting you is large, but it is not a majority. Meanwhile, Jeb Bush is even more likely to get respondents to say they could not support him.

Somewhat curiously, neurosurgeon Ben Carson does particularly well when respondents are given the option to refuse to support someone. He is the first choice of few, although he and former CEO Carly Fiorina do enjoy a lot of attention in September, despite never getting any support from party leaders.

So Republican activists reflect some of the preferences of party elites, but not perfectly. This is probably not because they do not know what they are. [Figure 4](#) shows that activists at least know that Trump is far from acceptable to most in the party. Meanwhile, Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz fare the best here, at least consistently. Bush does not – the activists are including their own views here presumably.

The Democrats show more cohesion, but there too we see some resistance from the activists. In July 2015, Hillary Clinton is the clear leader, while Bernie Sanders has more support than he does among party leaders. Unlike among the Republicans, Democratic party leaders had sent a strong signal very early that Clinton was the likely choice. The party elite had largely coalesced around her by July, and this is reflected in the activist responses.

But Clinton's support actually erodes over the course of the invisible primary. To be sure, she is still the most favored candidate by January, and more than 90% of activists view her as acceptable. They correctly see that she has the broadest appeal in the party, at levels much higher than anyone in the Democratic Party.

Equally significant is the degree of support for Sanders and Joe Biden throughout the period. One way to read this is that the Democrats were

not particularly divided. Some favored Sanders, but nearly everyone would be willing to accept an alternative.¹⁰ That was not true of Republicans.

At the same time, the activists do not present a uniform support for Clinton. The narrative that many in the party were uncomfortable with Clinton, or would have preferred another option if they had one, is probably true.

But Democratic support for Clinton seems more like Republican support for Mitt Romney in 2012 than like support for any Republican in 2016. Many Republicans seemed to want someone more inspiring, but as good alternatives were not on offer, the party settled on Romney, who clearly had the most party leader support.

5. Relationship between leaders and activists

The divergence between the party establishment and party activists shown in the last two sections is present in both parties, but it looks very different in each. In the Democratic Party, there is more support for Sanders among activists than among party leaders. But the activists still slightly favor Clinton. Among Republicans, Trump has significant support, while support for others maps imperfectly to leader support.

It is not possible to test theories with two cases, but a reasonable interpretation derived from these data is as follows. In both parties, activists are capable of disagreeing with elites. But what elites are telling them differs.

In the case in which party leaders are unified, this seems to be enough to bring most of the activists along. This might be because, as Sanders supporters claim, the air of inevitability that the endorsements create forces many activists to back Clinton. Or it may be that the coordination helps to unite the more mainstream elements of the activist base around a single candidate, instead of fragmenting. This could translate into a systematic advantage in many states, where established and experienced activists help one candidate campaign more than the other, and this is enough to win.

In the case in which the party leaders are fragmented, many activists follow those cues, but the cues lead in different directions. Activists are also fragmented. It is not clear what would happen if elites sent a unified signal. Presumably, some mainstream candidates would have dropped out if they could not get elite support, and some activists would have switched to the candidate who did. But many might have continued to back outsider candidates like Donald Trump. It is at least plausible that had the Republicans united behind one insider, then Trump might have looked much like Sanders did.

We should not infer that, in either party, what we see is a fight between activists and party leaders. In both parties, most activists agree with party

¹⁰This is consistent with the related finding that supporters of Sanders and Clinton in these data are equally likely to favor compromise over sticking to principles (Noel 2016).

PRIMARY AND CAUCUS PERFORMANCE 2016

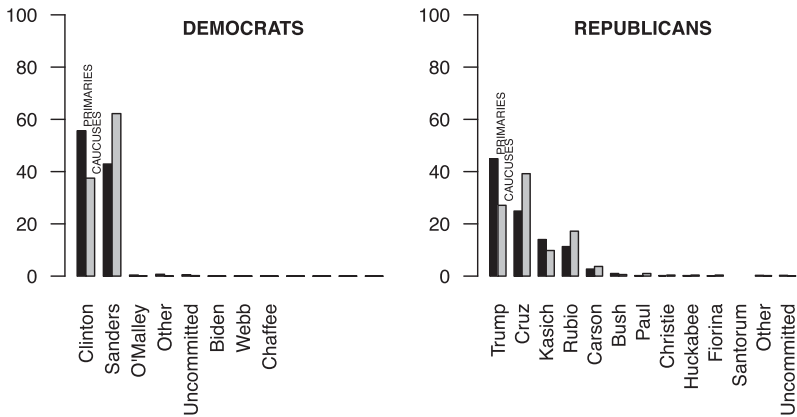


Figure 5. Primary and caucus performance 2016.

leaders. But the differences are great enough that we can begin to get a sense of how important activists are for the influence of party leaders on the system. Since the mechanisms for party leader control include activists, but are not limited to activists, we might also be able to exploit some variation in the areas where activists are important.

In caucus states, for instance, we might expect candidates to need activists more than they do in primary states. Most of the state contests in the nomination take place in primaries, which are conducted very much like a multi-candidate election, and delegates are awarded according to the state party rules after the contest. But several states conduct caucuses instead. The rules of the caucus can vary, but the distinguishing characteristic is that all voters convene at the same time and have some opportunity for deliberation before making their selection. Thus, caucuses require more mobilization, as well as coordination during the caucus itself. These are opportunities for activists to provide additional influence.

Figure 5 shows the candidates' different levels of success in caucuses and primaries.¹¹ With one very significant exception, candidates who do better among activists than among party leaders also tend to do better in caucuses than in primaries. Ted Cruz and Bernie Sanders, in particular, do very well in caucus states. That activists were behind this success is also consistent with the narrative during the campaign, which was that highly motivated Tea Party and progressive activists were fighting the establishment in low-turnout caucuses.

Here again, however, the outlier is Donald Trump, who does much worse in caucuses than in primaries. It is important to consider just how unusual Trump

¹¹Data from David Leip's Election Atlas: uselectionatlas.com.

was as a candidate. Had there been no Trump, it is possible that the Republican nomination might have played out like the Democratic nomination, with Cruz playing a Sanders-like role. Cruz and other Tea Party figures had been challenging the Republican establishment for some time, in the same way that Sanders and other progressive figure now challenges the Democratic establishment. Trump may have exploited some of that mistrust, but he was not a typical standard-bearer of the Tea Party movement.

In the end, we have only two cases, so we should not draw firm conclusions from them.¹² But what 2016 does demonstrate is that the relationship between party leaders and activists can vary, and such variation may be significant to outcomes.

6. Discussion

The nomination of candidates for office is one of the most central tasks of a political party (Schattschneider 1942). The nomination of a party leader is perhaps the most important task. In a presidential system such as ours, the party's candidate for president is about as close as one can come to a leader of the party.

The institutions that select nominees and party leaders will of course vary in their ability to reflect the interests and preferences of the party, just as all democratic institutions vary in the kind of representation they accomplish. When there is significant dissatisfaction with the nominees, as there was in 2016 for both parties, it is important to ask how well the institutions reflected party opinion.

But whose opinion should be reflected? The authors of *The Party Decides* make an empirical argument that party leaders (a) believe they should be influential and (b) have therefore sought and successfully found ways to exert influence. This leaves unanswered another empirical question? If party leaders sometimes lose out, which they do, who wins instead?

One natural answer is "the voters," but that is at best misleading. Voter turnout in presidential primaries is minimal, and the contest is generally over before voters in many states even get the chance to not turn out. Everything we know about voters suggests they take cues of some sort. If they are not taking party leader cues, what influences are they responding to?

Party activists provide a useful way of thinking about this middle ground. The voters who are most likely to push back against leader messages are also likely to volunteer and eventually get involved in party politics.

It is thus probably not right to think about this as a conflict between activists and party leaders. Rather, I think it is a fight among party leaders over who can influence the most activists, and among activists over whose support is the most important. These fights can be bitter or collegial, but they are not

¹²For this reason, I have eschewed formal statistical models, which would overstate the relationship.

simply conflicts among voters. Voters are mobilized by activists and candidates' campaigns. The need to recruit activists makes activists powerful.

Where the labor force of the party is fragmented, it is hard for anyone to get the upper hand. Party leader coordination can help steer coordination of activists, preventing such fragmentation.

In 2016, we see what can happen when party leaders fail to send such a signal. A fragmented party may remain fragmented, leading to precisely the scenarios that Nelson Polsby had worried about. In 2016, we also see what can happen when party leaders send a very clear signal, but a significant element of party activists resists that signal. In this case, the side with the leadership behind it won, but the presence of significant resistance from some in the party suggests that they may not always win.

Parties represent "no disciplined army" in V.O. Key's (1942) words, and nominations are where the internal divisions show up. CKNZ depicted the nomination as a (potential) conflict between voters and (when they are unified) political leaders. The role of mid-level party activists was largely unaddressed. If the contribution of CKNZ and related work is to flesh out the role of informal players in the party, then those informal players should not be treated as an undifferentiated block. These players compete with one another, and future work should focus on that competition.

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