The Democratic Presidential Primaries: a Fratricidal Race

Rodrigo Praino (May 11, 2008)

The seemingly never-ending primaries beg a host of questions: why is the process so long? Can the American public, and the Democratic party alike, survive the internal bickering? And more importantly, does Hillary Clinton really have a shot at the nomination? A gifted academic sheds some light

American voters are tired of the 2008 Presidential campaign. This national sense of fatigue is an ordinary occurrence that repeats itself every four years, usually around the end of October. The extraordinary fact here is that, this time, we are barely in the month of May.

“Presidential primary elections” are something most U.S. citizens take for granted. What many don’t know, or don’t quite fully understand, is that the Presidential candidate is not selected by parties

through primary elections. There is a long and complicated process that experts call the "Presidential nominating process". Primary elections play a key role within this process but they are only part of it. The complex system currently in use is the result of a slow and progressive historical development, culminating in a number of reforms implemented in 1972. These reforms were more than necessary after the bloody riots that broke out in Chicago right after the 1968 Democratic National Convention nominated Vice-President Hubert Humphrey as the Democratic Presidential candidate. Humphrey was the choice of the party's élite, while Gene McCarthy, the late Bobby Kennedy and George McGovern were the "popular" choices, according to the not-too-may – but nonetheless extremely important – Presidential primaries that took place at the time. The actions of the Democratic party in that instance were perceived as anti-democratic and unacceptable. A violent riot broke out in the city of Chicago, where the Convention was taking place. This explosive mix of mistrust and reaction after the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, opposition to the War in Vietnam, and the suspicion that a political party was ignoring popular will put the Presidential nominating process into the national spotlight, and the country started to demand reform. The result of the demands made in 1968 is the system still in place today.

From its inception in 1972, this system has been functioning quite well. There has been no major malfunctioning and the debate about possible reform and the core problems of the nominating process are mostly academic quarrels between scholars, experts and pundits. Most of the general public has never heard about the "front-loading" problem, the National Association of Secretaries of State Plan, the Time Zone Primaries or the Delaware Plan. Bottom line is that no matter how complicated it looks on the whole, the nominating system worked for more than 30 years as it should: people vote, the party nominates the most voted person and this person runs for President. Delegates, alternates, super-delegates and things like that didn't matter all that much!

This year, for the first time, the "primary" race is so close on the Democratic side of the political spectrum that there will not be a Presidential candidate until the Democratic Convention meets. If the party still remembers the consequences of the 1968 Convention, it is all but certain that whoever gets the highest number of delegates will also get the unconditional support of most super-delegates and obtain the nomination. In that case all of the worries and speculations we see today will finally become what they are bound to be: theoretical argumentations and media-buzz. However, what's at stake is the radicalization of U.S. politics and the concrete chances of the Democratic party in the general election.

Let's start with the first problem, the radicalization of politics. In 2005 Political Scientist Morris P. Fiorina, with the help of Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, explained in a book called Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America that the American voters are not as polarized as the newspapers would make them out to be. They proved that even in Dixieland extremely conservative positions are taken by a minority of voters, let alone the rest of the country. As much as their theory stands out as all but incontrovertible empirical evidence, the truth is that pragmatically it doesn't matter that much. However center-leaning the majority of American voters are, they must invariably choose among a fixed number of candidates. They must, in other words, slightly – or even not-so-slightly – modify their own views and positions and accept those of the candidate that they believe better suits their political needs. Mr. Obama and Mrs. Clinton are both to the left of their party and of the majority of American voters in a number of important issues: it is not a coincidence if, for example, when it comes to a National Healthcare System the debate between the two major candidates is no longer weather the U.S. should have one, but how to implement it. Independently of one's view on this matter, there is no doubt that both major candidates are alienating the Conservative Democrats' constituency, or making them vote against their position on the healthcare issue in order to support their party at the Presidential level. The main question in this case is: what is more important? The party or the issues?

The second question is a bit more complex. Can a party survive such a long and degrading fratricidal war? The answer is probably not. During the short history of the current Presidential nominating process, every time a political party presented itself as fragmented during the primary season, while

the opponent's field was defining itself and narrowing down a candidate, it lost the general election. It was the case of George McGovern in 1972, Gerald Ford in 1976, Jimy Carter in 1980, Walter Mondale in 1984, Michael Dukakis in 1988, George H. W. Bush in 1992, Bob Dole in 1996, and to a certain degree also of Al Gore in 2000 and John Kerry in 2004. All these "Presidential losers", faced hard opposition within their own party, or at least faced more opposition than their counterpart. Those with a good memory can recall the names George Wallace and Edmund Muskie in 1972, Ronald Reagan in 1976, Ted Kennedy in 1980, Gary Hart in 1984, Jesse Jackson, Al Gore, Dick Gephardt and the "Regional Primary" in 1988, Pat Buchanan in 1992 and in 1996, Bill Bradley in 2000 and Howard Dean and John Edwards in 2004. The main point is that primary elections within this complex nominating process are the only real way to build a true national political party in the United States that is able to support one single candidate for the Presidency.

Pundits and some scholars, especially in Europe, tend to define the American political parties as "weak", and the organization of primary elections is a symptom of rather weak parties according to mainstream Political Science literature. However, in the case of the United States, ridiculously large parties, covering a vast territory and putting together an incredibly large number of opinions and positions can only gather around one single candidate if there is a popular mandate to cut the race of all other positions at once. This is by all means the most important feature of Presidential primary elections in the U.S., and can only be fully accomplished if a candidate emerges quickly enough to be able to unify the party and run against the real enemy: the opposing party.

This Clinton/Obama struggle has been going on for too long now, it shows no sign of subsiding, and Sen. Clinton's only hope seems to be those super-delegates that could overturn the popular vote and trigger something similar to what happened in Chicago in 1968. Even if her plan succeeds, the most probable outcome, given all precedents since 1972, is the destruction of the Democratic party and a terrible debacle at the general election. Is that what we want for U.S. politics in the 21st century?

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