

Institutional Effects on the Presidential Nominating Process, 1976-2004 *

Luke Keele[†]

David K. Park[‡]

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Abstract

Here, we test how the institutional arrangements in the post-reform era have affected the duration of presidential primary campaigns. Specifically, we examine the effect of two institutional arrangements: delegate allocation rules and front-loading of the primary season. We find that, while front-loading has significantly shortened the primary season, it has not altered the effect of finishing strong in Iowa and New Hampshire. We also find few partisan differences in the length of presidential primary campaigns, however, the Democratic use of proportional delegate allocation appears to have prolonged the process for Democrats, therefore, countering the front-loading to an extent.

1 Introduction

In the early 1800s, a political party's presidential candidate was nominated by a congressional caucus. The Anti-Mason party held the first political convention in 1831 to choose a nominee and the Democratic-Republicans held their convention the following year. State party bosses controlled much of the delegate selection process during this time. However, during the progressive era of the early 1900s, reformers demanded to make the nomination process more democratic. In order to mitigate the influence of state party bosses, more states began to adopt primaries. Unfortunately, these primaries were more or less superficial contests, and not the mechanism to get the party's nomination.

The role of primaries began to dramatically change in the late 1960's. After the tumultuous 1968 Democratic National Convention, Sen. McGovern and Rep. Fraser headed a

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[†]Department of Politics and International Relations, Nuffield College and Oxford University, luke.keele@politics.ox.ac.uk

[‡]Department of Political Science, Washington University, dpark@artsci.wustl.edu

commission to examine the presidential nominating process. The McGovern-Fraser commission, as it became known, recommended that registered Democratic voters should have the “maximum feasible opportunity to participate in the delegate selection process.” Not to be outdone by the Democrats, the Republican National Committee established the Delegates and Organization Committee, and they also recommended that the nominating process be more democratic. As a consequence of these two committees, the modern era of presidential nominating politics was born.

Since then, the story of presidential prenomination campaigns has the story of momentum. The perennial questions revolving around momentum: who has it, who is losing it, and how do you keep it? This preoccupation with momentum extends to the study of presidential primaries as well. The key theoretical question in the extant literature being how do past victories translate into future victories? This focus on momentum has come at the expense of understanding how the institutional landscape exerts an influence above and beyond that of electoral success.

Therefore, we examine how the institutional arrangements in the post-reform era have affected the duration of presidential primary campaigns from 1976 to 2004. Specifically, we examine the effect of two institutional arrangements in particular: delegate allocation rules and the front-loading of the primary season.

2 Level of Analysis

Since the 1980s, more than 175 articles, chapters, or books have been written about the modern presidential nominating system (see [Norrander 1996](#) for a review of the literature). Much of the scholarly focus has been on individual primary voters ([Abramson, Paolino and Rohde 1992](#); [Bartels 1987, 1988](#); [Greer 1989](#); [Keeter and Zukin 1983](#); [Kenney and Rice 1994](#); [Lenart 1997](#); [Marshall 1984](#); [Mutz and Mondak 1997](#); [Norrander 1986, 1992](#); [Wattier 1983a,b](#)), while aggregate results have scarcely been examined ([Norrander 1993](#)). Shifting toward aggregate caucus and primary outcomes focuses the analytic lens toward the sequential and dynamic nature of the nominating process where “candidates’ fortunes rise and fall and [where] most candidates exit the contest before the winner emerges during the mid to late primaries”

(Norrander 1996, 897). Ultimately, the aggregate vote total in individual primaries and caucuses determines the delegate counts, and it is the total delegate counts that determine the party's presidential nomination.

Norrander (1993) notes that previous studies examining aggregate outcomes have failed to examine caucuses (Bartels 1988; Grush 1980); examine more than two candidates in one election (Grush 1980; Parent, Jillson and Weber 1987); and ignore the dynamic process in the nomination process (Parent, Jillson and Weber 1987). She overcomes these limitations and examines caucuses and primaries, both Republican and Democratic candidates, and covers the presidential years between 1976 to 1988, however, she fails to take into account more recent institutional arrangements in the post-reform era, specifically, the further front-loading of primaries. However, it is only at the aggregate level that we can begin to understand how institutional arrangements, thus we rely on aggregate analysis here.

3 Institutions and Primaries

States and political parties have competing interests in the design and scheduling of primaries. States desire to schedule their primary in order so that its citizens might exert some influence over the selection of the presidential candidates. Parties, however, desire to help the candidates perceived to have the best chance in the general election. We, next, explore these two interests in the context of front-loading and delegate allocation rules.

While New Hampshire always has the first primary, the other 48 states often jockey to have their primary at some interval thereafter as to be decisive in the selection of the presidential candidate. It is widely acknowledge that in 1988 states began to schedule strategically select dates after the New Hampshire primary so that their primary was not held at a point in the process after which the race had been decided. Since then states have moved their primaries closer and closer to the New Hampshire primary to avoid holding a moot primary.

It is widely assumed that front-loading has shorted the length of prenomination campaigns. However, there has not been any systematic investigation of how much shorter primaries actually are. We also don't fully understand how front-loading works. There are several possible mechanisms behind front-loading but they are not well understood. Beyond

just shortening the length of campaigns, [Norrande \(2000\)](#) argues that the front loaded primary system makes it less likely that candidates can use early victories to build momentum.

Since primaries are regulated at the state level, it makes national reforms difficult. Parties have used delegate allocation rules as one means of influencing primary outcomes. Since 1972, there has been considerable tinkering with the rules of delegate allocation. This has been especially true of the Democratic party, which has made changes designed to help certain candidates do better. From 1975-1978, states set the threshold for how many votes were required to pick up delegates. In 1980's, the Democratic party tried several different rules for delegate allocation. For example in 1988, the threshold for receiving delegates in a single primary was lowered to 15%. Then in 1992 winner take all was banned again. The Republicans have tinkered to a much lesser extent, which has meant a greater number of winner take all primaries.

In general, then, we expect that when a higher percentage of delegates are allocated proportional to the popular vote it will prolong primary campaigns. On the other hand, the effect of front-loading should shorten the primary season. With more primaries and delegates being compressed into a shorter time span, the risk of candidates dropping out of the race will increase. But there are a number of conditional aspects to these hypotheses. The affect of delegate allocation will vary across parties affecting Democrats more than Republicans. Front-loading should also diminish the effect of early victories in Iowa and New Hampshire. As more delegates are available earlier the momentum from early victories should matter less. Finally, the effect of front-loading may vary across parties. Since Republicans have relied more on winner-take-all primaries we might expect front-loading to matter to a greater extent for Republican candidates. Next we turn to the statistical evidence for how institutions affect the length of primary campaigns.

4 Data and Methods

We now outline the measures used in our analysis. To measure the extent of proportional delegate allocation, we record the percentage of primaries that allocate delegates proportionally. To measure front-loading, we rely on several different measures. Most crudely, we

measure the effect of front loading with an indicator variable for the primaries that occur in 1988 or later. This will allow us to test how the risk of dropping out has changed in the era of front-loading. The other measures of front-loading are more refined. The first of these measures is the percentage of delegates that have been awarded by March 31st. As this measure increases we would expect higher hazards, that is the risk of dropping out should increase for candidates. The next measure of front-loading is the week in which 50% of the delegates is awarded. Higher values of this measure should be associated with higher survival times and lower hazards. Finally, we also measure the number of days until the New Hampshire primary.¹ Like the last measure, here, we expect higher values to induce lower hazards.

We also include an indicator variable for Democratic candidates, visible candidates, and candidates that are running for political reasons other than hoping to win the nomination, whom we call agenda candidates. For the visible candidate measure, we use a indicator variable that is 1 if the candidate is a sitting president, vice-president, senator, or governor. We designated the following eight candidates as agenda candidates: Al Sharpton, Alan Cranston, Dennis Kucinich, Robert Dornan, Jerry Brown, Jesse Jackson, Alan Keyes, Pat Robertson, and Patrick Buchanan. We also have two different measures of the outcomes in the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary. The first is the percentage of the votes each candidate received and the second is an indicator variable for whether a candidate placed among the top three vote getters in these contests. We also test a several different interactions among these variables to test differences across both time and parties.

To test our theory, we estimate a series of Cox regression models. While the risk of dropping out of the primaries is likely to vary over time, our theory is not specific enough that we are willing to impose a strict functional form on the shape of the hazard function. As such, we use a Cox model, which doesn't require any assumptions about the shape of hazard function. We use the Efron method for ties, robust standard errors and cluster on each candidate.² We report hazard ratios instead of coefficients. Hazard ratios represent the relative size of the hazard for observations that differ by one unit on the covariate. We are generally interested in how much the hazard ratio differs from 1. When the hazard ratio is

¹We did not use the days until the Iowa caucuses since in most years under observation the Iowa caucuses were fixed to be eight days before the New Hampshire primary.

²We also estimated all models with exact methods for ties, but found it made no difference.

1 it suggests that the risk of dropping out of the primaries is invariant to changes in that covariate. As the hazard ratio rises above 1, the risk of a candidacy ending increases, but as the hazard ratio falls below, the risk of ending a candidacy falls.

5 Results

We first present two basic models that compare the two measures of the effect of the New Hampshire primary and the Iowa caucuses and allows us to test our basic hypotheses. Here, we do not consider several possible interactions, and we measure front-loading with the indicator for primaries after 1984. Table 1 presents the results from this preliminary analysis.

Table 1: The Effects of Institutions on Presidential Primaries, 1976-2004

Independent Variable	Candidate Exit	Candidate Exit
New Hampshire	0.16* (0.07)	0.92* (0.02)
Iowa	0.33* (0.16)	0.99 (0.01)
Democrat	0.61 (0.30)	0.38* (0.18)
Agenda Candidate	0.07* (0.05)	0.05* (0.03)
Proportional Allocation	1.02 (0.10)	1.03* (0.10)
Visible Candidate	0.54 (0.24)	0.46* (0.17)
1988	2.35* (0.83)	3.14* (1.14)
N	78	76

Note: Robust standard errors adjusted for clustering.

Efron method for ties.

* $p < .05$

The models in Table 1 offer a number of insights into the presidential primary process. First, the importance of the New Hampshire primary is unquestionable. In the first model, where the effect is measured with an indicator variable for a top three finish, we see that

for a candidate that finishes outside the top three the risk of ending their campaign is 85% higher. Alternatively, each percentage of the vote one picks up in New Hampshire reduces the risk of failure by 8%. The effect of Iowa is less clear cut. While finishing in the top three implies that the risk of failure is 67% lower, the estimate for the percentage of votes in Iowa is not estimated with enough precision to draw any inferences about its affect.

The most notable effect is that of front-loading. In both models, we see that the risk of ending one's campaign increased significantly after 1984. Candidates were 2.3 to 3 times more likely to end their bid for the presidency in the nomination campaigns in 1988 or later. These models than give us an aggregate estimate of how the compression of the primary calendar has affected the durations of candidacies. We also see that more visible candidates have lower hazard rates, and agenda candidates have very low hazard rates. For agenda candidates, the chance of them ending their campaign is only about an 5-8%.

The evidence on whether there are partisan differences in nomination durations is mixed. In both models, we see that Democrats are less likely to end their campaigns, but the effect is statistically significant in only one of the models. The evidence is also mixed on whether proportional delegate allocation matters to the length of campaigns. In both models, a higher percentage of primaries with proportional delegate allocation increases the risk of ending one's campaign by 1-3%. Not only is the effect quite small, it is also statistically insignificant in one of the models and in the wrong direction. It would seem then that the importance of delegate allocation rules is minimal.

In Figure 1, we summarize some of the results from the first two models. Here, we plot the average survival time for candidates who finish in the top 3 in the New Hampshire primary holding the rest of the model constant against the survival time for those candidates that finish outside the top three places. We also plot the average survival time for candidates before and after 1988. While the effect of front-loading is obvious as survival times are much lower in the era of front-loading, the effect of a top 3 finish in New Hampshire is much larger as candidates typically drop out of race once the winnowing effect of New Hampshire takes places.

To further explore the results from these initial analyses, we next examine whether the effects here are conditional. We do this in two ways. First, we test whether the effect of

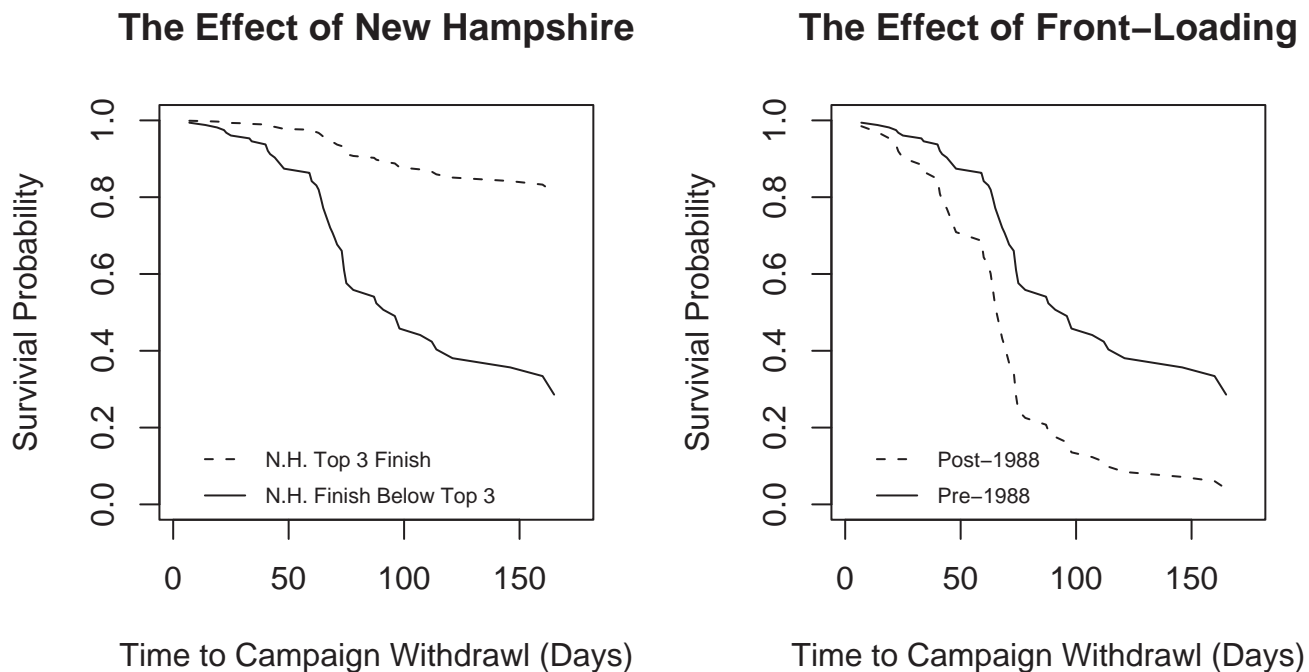


Figure 1: The Effect of The New Hampshire Primary and Front-loading, 1976-2004

delegate allocation and front-loading differs for the two parties. Second, we see whether the effect of the New Hampshire primary and the Iowa caucuses has changed in the era of front loading. The results are in Table 2.

While front-loading has shortened campaigns, it appears that the effect of early victories has not diminished. The effects of both the New Hampshire primary and the Iowa caucuses are unchanged in the era of front-loading. The same is true for the effect of partisanship, as there is no substantive difference between the two parties campaign durations since 1988. The only interaction that approaches conventional levels of statistical significance in this first model is that between proportional delegate allocation and partisanship. Given the high multicollinearity due to the presence of the 4 interactions in the model, we re-estimated the model with only the interaction between delegate allocation and party. In this second model, we find the interaction was significant. We report this model in the second column of Table 2.

In general, we find that as the number of primaries that as the use of proportional delegate allocation rises, the risk of ending the primary campaign falls. A one percent

Table 2: Interactive Effects in Presidential Primaries, 1976-2004

Independent Variable	Candidate Exit	Candidate Exit
New Hampshire	0.14* (0.08)	0.14* (0.06)
Iowa	0.29 (0.33)	0.28* (0.15)
Democrat	0.02* (0.04)	0.01* (0.02)
Agenda Candidate	0.05* (0.03)	0.05* (0.03)
Proportional Allocation	0.94 (0.05)	0.93* (0.04)
Visible Candidate	0.46* (0.21)	0.45* (0.18)
1988	1.96 (0.83)	1.47 (0.64)
Proportional x Democrat	1.09* (0.06)	1.11* (0.05)
Democrat x 1988	0.64 (0.62)	–
N.H. x 1988	0.92 (0.75)	–
Iowa x 1988	1.01 (1.29)	–
N	78	78

Note: Robust standard errors adjusted for clustering.

Efron method for ties. One-tailed tests.

* $p < .05$

increase in primaries with proportional delegate allocation reduces the risk of ending one's campaign by about 7%. But that effect varies widely across the two parties. For Republican candidates, an increase in proportional delegate allocation continues to produce a decrease in the hazard of 7%. But for Democrats the reduction in the hazard is an enormous 99%. So the higher levels of proportional delegate allocation has substantially increased the length of Democratic presidential prenomination campaigns. It would appear that the Democratic move to a system of requiring all primaries to use proportional delegate allocation systems has prolonged campaigns that would have been much shorter in an era of front-loading.

While it is clear that front-loading has reduced the lengths of presidential prenomination campaigns, all we can thus far is that campaigns have been much shorter since 1988. We, next, attempt to more carefully parse the source of the front-loading effect. We use three different measures of front-loading to see which best explains the mechanism by which front-loading shortens campaigns. We first attempted to include all three measures of front-loading in a single model, but again found they were too collinear to find any effects. Also the inclusion of the interaction between proportional delegate allocation and party proved to be highly correlated with the measures of front-loading and as a result had to be removed from the model as well.

While all three measure of front-loading are significant individually, there are clear differences in the magnitude of the effects. We consider the first measure of front-loading which is the number of weeks until 50% of the delegates has been awarded. This measure has the largest effect. For each additional week, the risk of dropping out decreases by 16%. So by stretching out the time frame in which delegates are awarded will lengthen the prenomination campaigns of presidential candidates. The second measure of front-loading has the smallest effect of the three. Not only does the second measure of front loading have the smallest effect, it is in the wrong direction. In the current model, the effect is such that a higher percentage of delegates awarded by March 31st increases the risk of campaign termination. Most likely the result of multicollinearity. The last measure of front-loading is the number of days from January 1st of the election year until the New Hampshire primary. Again, we find an effect of notable magnitude. For every additional day from January 1st until the New Hampshire primary, the risk of campaign termination falls about 5%. We estimate one final model of

Table 3: Mechanisms of Front-Loading in Presidential Primaries, 1976-2004

	Candidate Exit	Candidate Exit	Candidate Exit	Candidate Exit
New Hampshire	0.15* (0.06)	0.20* (0.08)	0.21* (0.09)	0.18* (0.07)
Iowa	0.34* (0.17)	0.21* (0.12)	0.24* (0.13)	0.24* (0.13)
Democrat	0.53 (0.25)	1.00 (0.55)	0.66 (0.32)	0.70 (0.35)
Agenda Candidate	0.08* (0.04)	0.05* (0.03)	0.08* (0.05)	0.07 (0.04)
Proportional Allocation	1.03 (0.25)	1.00 (0.01)	1.01 (0.01)	1.01 (0.01)
Visible Candidate	0.55* (0.24)	0.53 (0.18)	0.60 (0.25)	0.60 (0.25)
Front-Loading 1 ^a	0.84* (0.06)	–	–	0.89* (0.06)
Front-Loading 2 ^b	–	1.03* (0.01)	–	–
Front-Loading 3 ^c	–	–	0.94* (0.02)	0.96* (0.02)
N	78	78	78	78

Note: Robust standard errors adjusted for clustering in parentheses.

Efron method for ties. One-tailed tests. * $p < .05$

Cell entries represent hazard ratios and not coefficients.

^aNumber of Weeks Until 50% of Delegates Are Awarded

^b% of Delegates Awarded By March 31st

^cDays Until the New Hampshire Primary

front-loading with the first and last measures. Here, we find that only the New Hampshire primary measures remains significant.³ This statistical model further underscores the importance of New Hampshire in an entirely different way. Not only does the New Hampshire primary serve as a mechanism for winnowing candidates with little viability, it also serves as a marker for when most other primaries will be scheduled.

Conclusion

Presidential primaries are currently long on conventional wisdom and short on theory and empirical evidence that explains the general patterns of behavior that occur every four years. Here, we have focused on the institutional context and its evolution in the post-reform era of presidential primaries. We identified three key institutional aspects of the primary process: early electoral victories, delegate allocation rules, and front-loading. While it is understood that each of these factors probably has some effect on the length of presidential prenomination campaigns, the mechanisms for how they operate are indistinct and empirical evidence is limited.

We find that early electoral victories in the New Hampshire primary and the Iowa caucus are critical to staying in the presidential race. Finishing outside the top three almost certainly dooms a candidate to a short campaign. While in general we find that front-loading has significantly shorted the primary season, front-loading has not altered the effect of finishing strong in Iowa and especially New Hampshire. Moreover, the analysis further underscores the importance of New Hampshire, as the date of the New Hampshire primary appears to be a key determinant in the continued front-loading of the primary process. The sooner the New Hampshire primary appears on the calendar the sooner many candidates are given a strong signal about their continued viability.

While, in general, we found few partisan differences in the length of presidential prenomination campaigns, the Democratic use of proportional delegate allocation appears to have significantly prolonged the process for Democratic candidates. So, at least for Democrats, the delegate allocation process has worked to counter front-loading to some extent. Given, the

³In a model with all three measures or the second and the third, the levels of multicollinearity are too high.

brevity of the 2004 primary season, however, it appears that front-loading is perhaps having a larger effect. The analysis, however, does imply that without a system of proportional delegate allocation the 2004 primary season would have been even shorter. The work, though, remains unfinished. Currently we don't have data on a key aspect of presidential prenomination campaigns: financing. Future iterations of the work must, of course, address this area.

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