1 Presidential Nominations in Intra-party Conflict

After the first few contests in 2020, the Democratic presidential primaries were shaping up to be a messy rerun of the fight in 2016, in which "establishment" candidate Hillary Clinton held off a challenge from party "outsider" Bernie Sanders, a progressive who viewed most of the Democratic Party as too moderate.

By the 2020 South Carolina primaries, Sanders had finished first or second in Iowa, New Hampshire, and Nevada, and enjoyed a surge in national polling. It seemed that he might be in the lead. Unlike in 2016, the "establishment" wing of the party did not have a single clear champion. Pete Buttigieg had beaten or tied Sanders in Iowa and New Hampshire, but Joe Biden and Amy Klobuchar also won significant numbers of votes. It seemed possible that the more unified progressive wing of the party could exploit the fragmented support for the more moderate candidates.

Then, at the end of February, a decisive Biden win in South Carolina convinced Klobuchar and Buttigieg to drop out of the race, throwing their support to Biden. Many other prominent Democrats also announced support for Biden. Now, it was the progressives who seemed divided, with Elizabeth Warren possibly drawing support from the same pool of voters who might favor Sanders. Biden went on to win big on Super Tuesday and clinched the nomination soon after.

This narrative of the 2020 nomination race is the conventional wisdom (e.g. Korecki and Siders 2020; Korecki 2020; Bacon 2020; Allen and Parnes 2021) of what happened. It incorporates several key points most observers have made about the process.

First, the competition among candidates is viewed as competition among well-defined factions in the party – "progressives" against the "establishment." While these factions might ebb and flow, the implication is that they persist over at least the medium term, covering several election cycles. Such factions also exist in the Republican Party, where party "regulars" have faced challenges from a group of procedural radicals, known by names such as the Tea Party and Make America Great Again (MAGA).

Second, each faction is thought to need one champion. If more than one candidate is running within a faction's "lane," those candidates will split the faction's support, letting the other side win. Donald Trump's outsider challenge to the Republicans in 2016 was successful because the anti-Trump forces were so fragmented, while Clinton dispatched Sanders much more easily in that year because the anti-Sanders vote was not spread out among other establishment candidates.

Finally, the factions in the presidential nomination fight are seen as a reflection of divisions in the party more broadly. A progressive wing exists in Congress, so of course it will manifest in nominations.

All three of these observations, and this general narrative, have much truth to them. Political parties are coalitions, and coalitions have fault lines. Those fault lines should be especially visible in nomination contests, which by their very nature pit different members of the same party against each other.

But we argue that much is missing from this picture.

Parties are coalitions, but *intra*-party coalition politics is not merely *inter*-party politics replicated inside the party. Parties, particularly party leaders, have a strong incentive to try to hold their coalitions together. Those incentives are especially powerful for presidential nominations, which designate the effective leader of the entire party. The weight of this choice changes the strategies of party coalition members in ways that this narrative does not account for.

1.1 Factions and Nominations

The choice of a presidential candidate is a particularly illuminating place to look for how parties manage their factions. Political parties are, in E.E. Schattschneider's (1942) words, "a maneuver in numbers" (p. 38) in which potentially distinctive politicians, perhaps representing differing factions, coordinate for victory. Parties perform this task in every arena, from the legislature to the electorate. But, according to Schattschneider, nominating candidates might be "the most important activity of the party" (p. 64).

In choosing a leader, parties need to identify one person who can represent all their factions. Many politicians can succeed as agents of their own factions. But leaders, especially the president, must try to appeal to everyone.

Our central argument is that this changes how both the party establishment and any competing factions will approach the presidential nomination. The result is a mixture of cooperation and conflict.

Factions can try to cooperate with the mainstream of the party, influencing their choices, while ultimately accepting a compromise. Or they can try to win over the nomination by brute force. Establishment politicians similarly can try to co-opt rival factions, or they can try to block them out altogether.

These two strategies – cooperation or conflict – are both likely present for every nomination. Which prevails depends at least in part on the institutions that the party has for selecting a nominee. As Nelson Polsby (1983) argued, the post-reform institutions of the U.S. parties do not adequately provide the "coalition forcing" mechanism that would ensure that cooperation dominates. In that

institutional environment, both strategies should be present, but it is an empirical question which ones dominate.

In fact, these two strategies are central to the distinction between the establishment and other factions. Observers typically use the word "establishment" to refer to the dominant or in-power group, but also to those who are the traditional and usually more moderate or pragmatic part of the party. Our focus will be on the first sense. The esablishment is the part of the party that is running things, and other factions might challenge it.

1.2 Networks

We look for evidence of these strategies in the presidential nomination behavior of party leaders.

In every nomination contest, party notables express their support for different possible nominees. Previous research has shown that these endorsements are at least predictive of (Steger 2007), and perhaps influential on (Cohen et al. 2008) the outcome of the contest.

We look at these data from a different perspective. If party leaders believe that their endorsements will be helpful to their supported candidate, what can we learn from studying who supports whom?

For each party, we trace out the network of support among these party elites. Did the politicians who supported Hillary Clinton in 2016 go on to support Joe Biden in 2020? Did the Reagan people in 1980 become the Bush people in 1988?

Social Network Analysis (SNA) allows us to describe these networks of support and identify the subcommunities within them. This in turn will give us a richer insight into the factional tendencies of the parties.

Presidential endorsements are, on the one hand, a natural place to look for factional behavior. But, as we will argue, they are also far from ideal. Because politicians are being strategic, their endorsements will not always reveal their true internal preferences. This is true of most political behavior, and especially of elite political behavior.

This is both a weakness and a strength of our approach. The data we have will not reveal every factional cleavage, only those that extend to behavior. So we may not be able to map the actual factions. What we are mapping is the extent to which those factions shape nomination politics. If the incentives to factionalize dominate, we will find factions. If the incentives to cooperate dominate, we will find unity. To the extent that both are present, we will find evidence of both.

And we do find both. By looking systematically across a long period of time, we find evidence of factional behavior. We also find still more evidence of repeated efforts to find a compromise.

1.3 Section Outline

The coming sections present a focused investigation into these questions in the specific context of recent presidential nominations.

In Section 2, we systematically explore what a faction is, and how they might show up in presidential nomination politics. A faction is not just any subgroup within a party, but one that aims to change the direction of the party from within. Even if factions are present, they may coordinate and compromise with others in a nomination contest.

Section 3 turns to our data and methods. We extend the data set on presidential endorsements from Cohen et al. to include data from 2012 to 2020. We supplement the resulting data set, which includes all presidential nominations for a major party candidate from 1972 to 2020, with biographical information on each endorser. In this section, we explain the application of SNA methods to this data set and provide readers with an overview of the networks in the two parties.

Section 4 takes an in-depth look at the divisions within the parties. We use a network-based clustering approach known as community detection to identify the groups of endorsers who tend to make the same decisions together over time. These are *communities* and are central to our analysis. By bringing in a variety of biographical and political characteristics of the endorsers within the communities, we can characterize each community. This method detects four communities in the Democratic network, and ten in the Republican network (only six of which are large enough to analyze). The communities in each party are split between the establishment and possible factions.

Section 5 returns to the narrative we introduced at the beginning of this section, and especially to the idea of "lanes" in presidential nominations. Using our data and survey data of primary voters, we demonstrate that presidential nominations are less about lanes and more about building consensus among factions.

Section 6 maps our network communities onto factional caucuses in the U.S. House. We examine whether our factional communities correspond with distinct patterns of factional caucus membership. These data also allow us to probe the possibility that the establishment communities are coalitions of distinct intra-party groups. We find some evidence of both, with variations by party. Establishment communities in both parties are inclusive of members from distinct factional caucuses, supporting the idea that presidential endorsement politics are an arena where many would-be factional actors set aside their differences to cooperate.

We conclude in Section 7 by assessing what our analysis tells us about party politics. It is common to speak of party factions, but they are sometimes treated as if they are to parties as parties are to the polity. This is not accurate. Factions are motivated to reshape the direction of their party, but they also want to cooperate with existing coalition partners. Hence our view that most are cooperating factions.

2 Party Factions

To most political scientists, political parties – particularly U.S. parties[1] – are *coalitions*. That is, parties are not groups of perfectly like-minded politicians, but rather teams bringing together differing interests. Partisans have differences, but they are willing to set them aside for collective gain. This need to build a stable coalition is central to why parties form in the first place.

Treating parties as coalitions is a flexible approach. For example, this approach allows us to think about parties as coalitions of completely distinct legislators, hoping to maximize their policy victories (e.g. Schwartz 1989) and to avoid instability (e.g. Aldrich 1995). Parties can stem from preexisting interest groups teaming up to win elections (e.g. Karol 2009; Bawn et al. 2012). They may be built around ideological cores or movements (e.g. Noel 2013; Schlozman 2016), and so on. Parties are likely all these things.

Scholarship on American parties has lately turned an eye toward the dynamics among different elements within the parties. Scholars have focused on an intermediate level of organization – the faction. A faction is a sub-coalition within a party that seeks to influence or reshape its party.

This academic interest echoes the attention that American party factions are receiving from journalists and other political observers. Factions are not new, of course, but the prevailing view of the contemporary major parties is that they are particularly rent by factions, struggling to hold themselves together. The Democratic Party is divided between "Progressives" and "Moderates" or "the Establishment,"[2] while the Republican Party has seen a takeover, in which a Tea Party turned "Make America Great Again" faction (Blum 2020), committed to Donald Trump, has effectively ousted the long-standing "Establishment," which reflected a different vision of conservatism (Hopkins and Noel 2022).

In this section, we outline the implications of factional divisions on the selection of the parties' presidential candidates.

[1] As we see it, this is true of parties everywhere, but in the United States' two-party system, where each party must bring together roughly half of the nation's politics, the coalitions are especially broad, hence our focus on U.S. parties.

[2] The scare-quotes here make clear that finding labels for these factions is fraught, a point to which we will return.

2.1 Theories of Faction

For many students of American politics, the idea of "factions" calls to mind James Madison's discussion, in *Federalist 10*, of "curing the mischiefs of faction." What Madison meant is slightly less precise than what we mean by the word, but his analysis is relevant. Madison was concerned that a group of citizens might want things that are at odds with the public interest and that they might capture control of the government to implement them. For Madison, a faction is any coherent interest or group that wants anything for itself.[3]

Madison thought to thwart such groups by creating a large, diverse republic with separated powers. Narrow interests in such a system would not be able to organize and capture the entire government.

But Madison was perhaps too optimistic about both the desirability and the effectiveness of his solution. Under the extreme fragmentation that he prescribes, very little can be accomplished at all. When political actors saw this problem and tried to resolve it, they created political parties (Schattschneider 1942). Political actors who represent narrow interests (e.g., Madison's factions) or even personal ambitions will seek out others to coordinate with. Even without Madison's hurdles, politicians will struggle to build careers in politics or advance any policy or social goals if they try to do it alone. They are more successful when they build a coalition with others. They are more successful still when those coalitions are "long" (Schwartz 1989; Aldrich 1995), in duration or even just in scope.

So, politicians form parties, uniting with other politicians who have their own goals. Some of these politicians' goals may be compatible with one another, some in conflict, and others in between. As members of a party, these political actors agree to compromise where they can and to yield where they cannot. They do so because there is strength in numbers, and the party is a necessary vehicle to achieve this strength.

In multiparty democracies, a smaller party can win seats or become part of a coalition that controls government. In the U.S. system, a party must have a chance at a majority, a reality that makes it difficult for smaller political coalitions to gain political influence on their own. This is where factions come in. They are the main vehicle for smaller political alliances to gain influence in politics in the United States.

Analogous to the parties in a multiparty coalition government, the factions in U.S. parties have their own focuses, and they unite with other groups or factions

[3] Some readers treat "faction" as synonymous with "political party," but Madison was not thinking of anything as well organized as modern political parties.

to form a majority. They must do so before the election, rather than in parliament. U.S. parties are thus something like permanent pre-electoral coalitions. The internal factions are more fluid and less formal, perhaps, but serve a similar role.

2.1.1 Long Coalitions and Factions

To understand how factions interact with the larger party coalition, we look more closely at the Schwartz-Aldrich model of a legislature that leads its members to form a "long coalition." The long-coalitions framework is useful to us for two reasons. First, its logic precedes the development of any specific party institutions. Since any coordination on the presidential nomination takes place in the informal invisible primary, against a backdrop of weakened (Azari 2023) or hollowed out (Schlozman and Rosenfeld 2024) formal parties, we want a framework that explains the broad incentives independent of those institutions. Those institutions do matter, as we discuss throughout this section, but the incentives do not depend on them.

Second, this framework is explicitly oriented toward the incentives to form a coalition against the incentives to pursue goals alone. It captures exactly the tension we are interested in, even without the coalition-forcing role that Polsby argued the convention provides.

The basic logic can be illustrated with a simple legislature with three members, A, B, and C, considering a series of bills, starting with these three.

In Table 1, each bill gives one legislator (or their district) something and costs another legislator/district something. The third legislator is unaffected. We could set this up in different ways. The set up in Table 1 follows Bawn (1999), who highlights cases where some actors have a goal, others oppose that goal, and still others are indifferent. For example, some people want to

Table 1 Payoffs for legislators over different bills.

	Legislator or "Group"		
	A	**B**	**C**
Bill 1	gain	indifferent	loss
Bill 2	indifferent	loss	gain
Bill 3	loss	gain	indifferent
...		...	...

expand abortion rights, others want to limit abortion, and still others don't really care.[4]

With the preferences in Table 1 and a simple legislative setting with an agenda and majority rule, we can consider the strategies that the actors might take. In such a game, what happens with each bill depends a lot on what the indifferent actor does. For example, A might persuade B to vote for Bill 1 on its merits. Or A might pledge to oppose Bill 2 to gain the support of B on Bill 1. But A and B would have a harder time agreeing on Bill 3, prompting both to look to C for help. And C might demand their support on Bills 1 or 2 (or future bills that are like those first two).

As they consider future legislation, the actors in our example might make such one-off agreements and short-term logrolls, sometimes being on the winning side, sometimes on the losing side. However, any majority of legislators (in this case two) could improve their lot by committing to *always* work together. A and B would need to find a way to resolve their disagreement on bills like 3, but that would be worth it to always have others' support on bills like 1 and 2. This is what Schwartz and Aldrich called a long coalition.

This logic generalizes to a larger legislature, as Schwartz and Aldrich explain. If a majority commits to forming a long-standing coalition, they will be able to get more policy wins for themselves (and their constituents) than if they construct a new coalition for every bill. This, they argue, is why parties form and why politicians work to hold them together. Bawn et al. (2012) work through this same logic outside the legislature, where the individual actors are social "groups" who may join forces to form parties. Instead of the "gentleman from Vermont" and the "gentlelady from California" forming a party, they would refer to "labor unions" and "civil rights groups."

The long coalition is an "equilibrium" in this game, meaning none of the actors will regret having participated after the fact. But it is also potentially fragile. To ensure success, ambitious politicians create institutions to help hold their long coalition together. "A political party is therefore more than a coalition," as Aldrich (p. 284) puts it. "A major political party is an institutionalized coalition, one that has adopted rules, norms and procedures." In the context of a legislature, these rules, norms, and procedures include legislative organization, in the form of party leaders and whips. Or in Bawn et al.'s application, they include nomination procedures to ensure the right candidates stand for the party.

[4] Other arrangements of preferences can highlight other features of legislative conflict. Schwartz and Aldrich start with a model in which each legislator has a preferred project with concentrated benefits for themselves, or their district, and diffuse costs to the entire legislature. This models distributive politics, where again parties are the solution that emerges.

Schwartz and Aldrich argue that actors create party institutions in response to the incentives they outline. But different institutions may be more or less effective at serving those incentives. Some institutions may even encourage undesirable behavior. The current system of public presidential debates, for example, gives potential candidates a major platform, encouraging the emergence of candidates who appeal directly to voters, independent of party coordination. But even if the nomination process is ill-suited to the task, it is where the coalition is formed and enforced. The mix of the informal and opaque invisible primary and the decentralized formal primaries and caucuses is where coalition formation occurs.

The institutions that help forge the party coalition are important because many different coalitions, or equilibria, are possible (Bawn 1999). To begin with, A and B can be in a coalition, but it is just as likely for A and C or B and C to form a long coalition. Once the two have committed to work together, they will benefit from that deal, but if something shakes their agreement, another partnership could be tempting.

Beyond *whom* is in the coalition, how the coalition members work out their disagreements and the relative strength of the members can also change. Long coalitions can vary in the commitment they demand from their members. They can demonstrate varying degrees of hostility to those outside the coalition. They can vary in the value they give to different coalition members, such that some groups in the coalition might get more than others. Some coalitions form among natural allies who have few internal disagreements, while others consist of strange bedfellows. *All* these possibilities are equilibria, and all are better than going it alone.

For instance, Bawn describes a difference in what she calls the "commitment" expected by the coalition. Bawn distinguishes between two equilibria, one of which expects subscribers of a coalition "to help their allies when costs fall on outsiders and to avoid imposing costs on allies but does not demand that subscribers take any action when outsiders threaten to impose costs on the ally." Or one arrangement might require two coalition members to always split the difference evenly on issues where they disagree, while another would systematically favor one partner over the other. Any of these arrangements can be an equilibrium, but they are all different.

It makes sense that, even if long coalitions are desirable, different actors will have different preferences over which long coalition would form, and what kind of coalition it will be. Conflict over either of those questions can lead to factions. A faction, in other words, might want a wholly different coalition, ejecting some members and bringing in others. But it also just might want the same coalition to

be less willing to compromise with the other party or to just shift the balance of power among coalition partners.

But intra-party conflict over the nature of the coalition is different than inter-party conflict. It is not a mirror of general politics, replicated at a smaller scale.

2.2 Factions as "Groups" versus Factions as Strategies

One way to think about who the factions are is to look at the groups that join to form a party. In the toy example, A and B could be factions in the long coalition that includes them both. Factional conflict might involve the trade-off on bills like 3, where A and B are opposed. Maybe they have decided to compromise on these issues. Maybe they have decided to mostly keep them off the agenda, just as the Northern and Southern Democrats, as factions in the party during the New Deal Coalition, tried to keep civil rights issues off the agenda.

Of course, most parties are made up of more than two distinct interests, as in our toy example. But a party with several groups might still be divided between one set of groups and another set. Some of these groups might even leave one party and join another, as pro-segregation Southern Democrats did in the mid twentieth century.

These groups-as-factions are interesting, but most factions are of a different arrangement. The social groups that Karol (2009) and Bawn et al. (2012) describe are rarely monolithic. They can have internal disagreements about substance and strategy. What happens when some religious conservatives, for example, are willing to compromise on abortion restrictions, but others are not?

To illustrate, we expand our simple three-person legislature to something larger. Here, consider the case where each group is internally divided.

In Table 2, we have broken groups A, B, and C each into two subgroups: A1 and A2, B1 and B2, and C1 and C2. The A's have the same general interests and goals, and likewise the B's and the C's, but they may differ on other things. For

Table 2 Payoffs over different bills, with groups fragmented.

	Legislator or "Group"					
	A1	**A2**	**B1**	**B2**	**C1**	**C2**
Bill 1	gain	gain	indifferent	indifferent	loss	loss
Bill 2	indifferent	indifferent	loss	loss	gain	gain
Bill 3	loss	loss	gain	gain	indifferent	indifferent
...	...	...	...	...	...	...