

**The Party Stands Aside:
Elite Party Actor Endorsements during Presidential Primary and Caucus Voting, 2004-
2016**

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Abstract

Party elites influence the outcomes of presidential nomination contests through endorsements, financial support, encouragements to run, and other means. In this paper, we compare the patterns of elite endorsements of presidential candidates in six recent nomination contests—the Democratic races in 2004, 2008, and 2016, and the Republican contests in 2008, 2012, and 2016. We examine these contests with an eye not toward their eventual outcomes but to the manner in which a set of elite party actors—governors and members of Congress—made their public endorsements of candidates for each nomination. The results suggest that many elite actors in twenty-first century nomination contests, particularly in Republican contests, are more likely than not to choose to wait for the first caucuses and primaries to take place before choosing a candidate to support. This decision, while consistent with ideals of democratic participation, also reduces elite influence over nomination outcomes. Before voting begins, party actors can support a candidate for any number of reasons: Ideology, specific issue positions, experience, personal characteristics, as well as electability. Once voting has begun, however, elite actors appear to be constrained by the preferences of rank-and-file party members; this constraint limits party actors' ability to slow down an undesirable candidate who wins early primaries and caucuses, and raises the importance of strong showings in the earliest primaries and caucuses.

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Introduction

Strategic considerations are often a critical factor in would-be candidates' decisions about whether or not to run for office (Jacobson 2004, Lawless 2012). A potential candidate may ask herself if she is likely to win, if her party is likely to hold a majority after the election, or if running will advance or hamper long-term career goals. An incumbent may ask himself if another term is likely to bring a coveted committee chairmanship, or if a strong candidate is likely to challenge him. Similarly, the men and women who would be president consider not just their own high opinion of their own skills but also their likelihood of winning their party's nomination and the general election in determining whether or not to run. Candidates are not alone in considering the presidential landscape in strategic terms. Elite party actors—elected officials, former officeholders, fundraisers, interest group leaders, and other influential individuals—also evaluate potential presidential candidates, their issue positions, and their electoral viability. These actors, whose policy priorities, electoral fortunes, and other political or career goals are affected dramatically by whether their party's candidate becomes president, and how that president performs in office, evaluate these candidates with an eye toward both their likelihood of winning the election, and their acceptability on key issue positions (Cohen et al. 2008, Bernstein 2004). A candidate who is in perfect alignment with these actors' policy preferences but unlikely to win the general election because of a history of controversy, scandal, or inflammatory statements, for instance, would be less likely to win these actors' support than a candidate who is only partially aligned with elite party actors' policy preferences but strikes them as very likely to win both the nomination and general election.

"Elite party actors," of course, are not a monolith. Different individuals will have different policy priorities and different evaluations of what makes a candidate electable or not.

One person's unhinged rhetorical bomb-thrower is another's plain-speaking truth-teller. Taken in the aggregate, however, we can learn about elite actors' considerations of candidates for their party's presidential nomination from their decisions about which candidates to endorse publicly and when they choose to announce these endorsements. In this paper, we consider whether these endorsement decisions are affected by the context of the general election, by which party elites are associated with, or the idiosyncrasies of a given election cycle. On the first point, we are interested in the extent to which the nature of the general election appears to affect elite party actors' endorsement decisions during the primary contest. Specifically, do elite party actors behave, in the aggregate, differently when their party's eventual nominee will be facing an incumbent president than they do when an incumbent president is barred by the Twenty-Second Amendment from seeking another term?

Second, are there differences between the parties in how party actors evaluate and line up behind candidates for their nomination? While political folk wisdom about Republicans' tendency to always nominate the candidate "next in line" for the nomination has little empirical support (Bernstein 2013, Kilgore 2009), research into nomination contests has found that endorsements have been a stronger predictor of nomination contest outcomes for Republicans than Democrats (Steger 2007). Freeman (1986) argues that each party also possesses a distinct political culture, with power flowing upward from the grassroots in the Democratic Party and downward from party leaders in the Republican Party. Do the patterns of endorsements among Republican officeholders differ from those of Democratic elites along these lines? Are Democratic officeholders more scattered in their support for candidates, or more likely to wait to endorse until the voters have had a chance to express their preferences among the contenders? Do Republican officeholders announce their preferences earlier and expect primary

voters to "fall in line" (in contrast, so the aphorism goes, to Democratic primary voters and caucus-goers, who "fall in love" with a favorite candidate and vote accordingly)? Or are the parties' elites, for all of their ideological and partisan differences, similar to one another in their strategic considerations of which candidate would make the strongest nominee?

If no apparent similarities between nomination contests related to party or to the question of whether the party's nominee will face an incumbent president in the general election present themselves, then that would suggest that elite party actors are motivated by more idiosyncratic concerns—their beliefs about the candidates' electoral strengths, key issue positions, concerns about their own electoral goals, and the like—in making endorsement decisions.

To analyze the timing of endorsements by elected officials in a range of nomination contests, we have collected endorsement data from the 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016 nomination contests. Since 2008 and 2016 saw open contests for each party's nominations, this data covers a total of six contests. Each party is represented by one contest in which the eventual nominee would face off against a sitting president (2004's Democrats and 2012's Republicans) and two in which an incumbent president was barred from the general election by the Twenty-Second Amendment (2008 and 2016).

Our principle concern is with the timing of endorsements: When in the nomination season did a given elected official endorse a candidate? While it is often a risky thing to speculate about the inner lives of the political class, it seems safe to suggest that the timing of an endorsement can tell us something about the motivations behind that endorsement. An endorsement made in the earliest stage of the nomination season—during the period between a candidate's declaration of candidacy through the start of voting in the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary—is likely being made in an attempt to lead the party's voters in making their choice. An

endorsement made during the competitive phase of the contest—after Iowa and New Hampshire but before the party has arrived at a nominee, when there are multiple, viable candidates still in the mix—is likewise likely meant to influence primary voters and caucus participants who have yet to make their choice. Conversely, an endorsement made at the end of the primary season—once it has become clear which candidate is going to be the nominee, whether or not competing candidates have formally ended their campaigns—is likely made in an effort to follow, rather than lead, public opinion. Elites making endorsements at this stage may also do so in order to get into the good graces of their party's new nominee and to coax reluctant members of the rank and file to support the nominee.

We have collected this endorsement data from campaign announcements and press accounts, and coded each endorsement for the date on which it was announced.¹ We follow the approach taken by Steger (2007) and restrict our universe of endorsers to three groups: Sitting governors, United States senators, and members of the House of Representatives. While this leaves out former officials, party chairs, interest group leaders, and other important party figures, this approach has the benefit of leaving us with a contained, defined group of potential endorsers. As a result, we can not only measure how many endorsements each candidate has received at a given point in a given cycle, we can also measure how many of our officials have elected *not* to endorse a candidate at any given point in a cycle. This, in turn, tells us something about how the elites in each party are approaching the nomination generally. Higher percentages of elected officials not endorsing in the pre-Iowa period will indicate that these officials are not yet prepared to make a decision. We cannot definitively say what they are waiting on—a new candidate to enter the race, a candidate to commit to a particular policy position, the results of a straw poll or other indication of candidate strength, or something else—but even without

knowing their reasoning we can still say that they are not yet ready to suggest to the party's primary voters and caucus-goers just whom they should support. Similarly, a high percentage of publicly uncommitted officials during the primary voting period will indicate that party elites as a class are reluctant to intervene during this period, or that they are waiting on particular election results to bring them off the fence and into one candidate's camp.

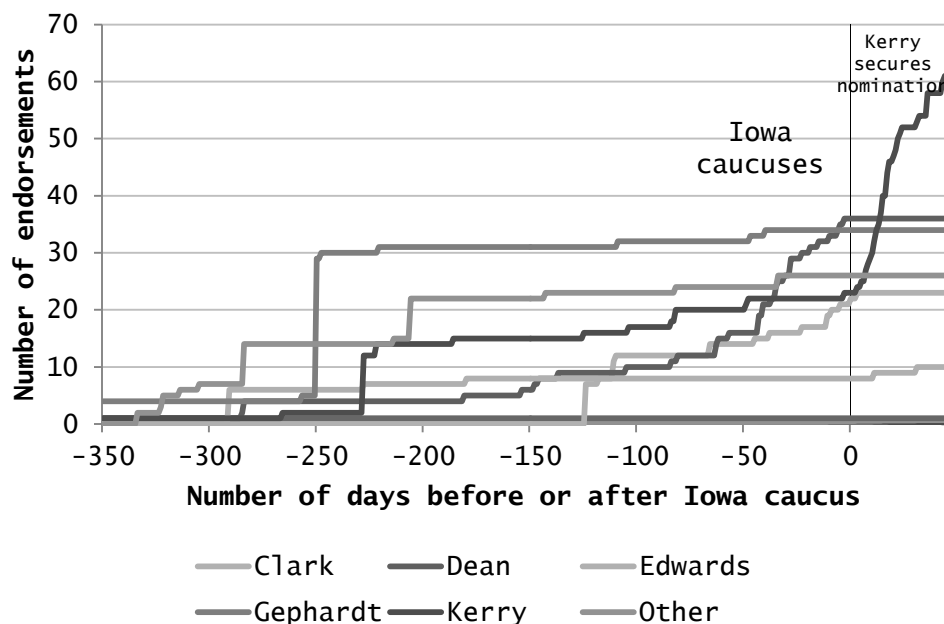
Endorsement dates are drawn from news accounts, campaign statements, and other contemporaneous endorsement counts made during each nomination contest. We believe our data includes all endorsements made by our universe of potential endorsers during this period, but also note that not every elected official endorses in every year. Therefore there are individuals whose endorsements we may have missed; however, any one of these missing elected officials who announced their support for a candidate managed to do so without attracting the notice of either the candidate they endorsed or any of the national political reporters covering each race.

We code each endorsement for the date on which it was made, and calculate the number of days between that date and the Iowa caucuses. This provides a broad overview of where elite support, in the form of endorsements by incumbent governors, senators, and House members, was lining up throughout each nomination contest. We are particularly interested in when during the contest these elected officials made their decisions: Before the start of voting, during the competitive phase of the contest, or after the party's nominee had been determined. To help illustrate the timing of these endorsements relative to the start of voting, in the figures detailing each contest we have assigned the day of the Iowa caucuses a value of 0; days following the caucuses are assigned positive values and those preceding the caucuses are assigned negative values.

Results

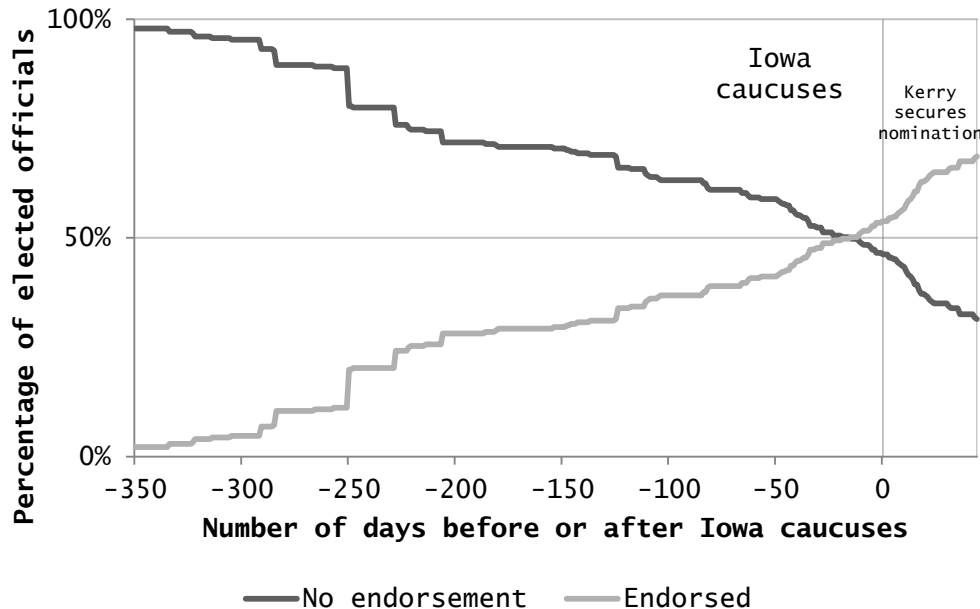
Figure 1 displays endorsements for each major Democratic candidate from January of 2003 through March 3, 2004, when Massachusetts Senator John Kerry became the presumptive Democratic nominee. In this contest, our elected officials' endorsement timing suggests an inability or an unwillingness to unify behind any one candidate before the party's voters had a chance to weigh in. By January 19, the day of the Iowa caucuses, no candidate had won the support of more than 36 of the 277 elected officials studied. And that leading candidate was former Vermont Governor Howard Dean, whose opposition to the war in Iraq, youth appeal, and online fundraising success helped him lead many opinion polls throughout the latter half of 2003. Close behind was Representative Richard Gephardt with 34 endorsements; most of Gephardt's endorsements came from his fellow members of the House of Representatives, and he acquired few after an initial burst of support at the start of his campaign. Dean would ultimately place third in Iowa, and Gephardt a distant fourth. John Kerry, by comparison, had only 23 endorsements.

Figure 1: Elected officials' endorsements of Democratic candidates, 2003-2004



Once voting began, however, the endorsement situation changed quickly. Senator Kerry's victories in Iowa and New Hampshire led to a sharp increase in his endorsement totals. By the time he became the presumptive nominee on March 3, Kerry had the support of 61 endorsers.² Equally important is the lack of endorsements for other candidates after Iowa and New Hampshire. Other than a single endorsement for John Edwards, the last serious challenger to Kerry's nomination³ after Iowa and New Hampshire, none of our elected officials came off the fence for a candidate other than John Kerry.

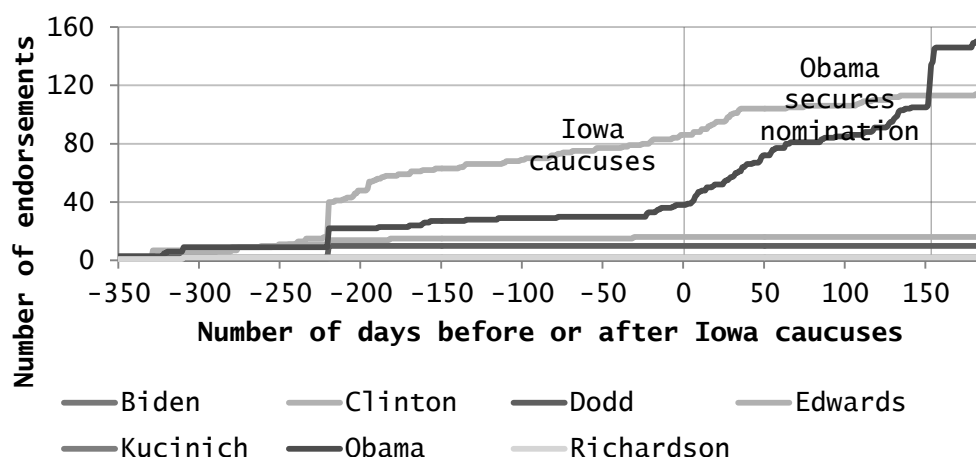
Figure 2: All endorsements by Democratic elected officials, 2003



For 2004's Democrats, then, much depended on the outcome of the earliest primary contests. Figure 2 shows the percentage of our elected officials who had endorsed on each day of the primary contest, as well as the percentage of elected officials who had not yet made an endorsement. Just over half of these officials waited to make an endorsement until voters had weighed in.⁴ And while Democratic nomination contests frequently lead to debates over whether party elites will or should act to counter the preferences of primary voters and caucus-goers,

2004 saw no real efforts to support the candidacies of alternate candidates, despite concerns that Kerry was insufficiently antiwar (compared to Dean) or too Northeastern or liberal to win in swing states (compared to Clark or Edwards), once Kerry won in Iowa and New Hampshire. Also noteworthy is that while these elected officials waited for the party's rank and file to have a chance to have their say, they saw no need to wait for very many members of the rank and file to have that chance: Many of these officials came out in support of Senator Kerry quickly after his initial wins. One possible explanation is that these officials saw Kerry's primary wins as proof that he was the strongest challenger to President Bush, and wanted to secure his nomination early so that Kerry could focus on the general election. Another is that these officials saw a protracted nomination contest as potentially damaging to Kerry's candidacy and, by extension, the party's prospects in 2004. A third is that they saw getting behind Kerry as helpful to their own political interests and prospects, since he was likely to be nominated and could well have become president.

Figure 3: Elected officials' endorsements of Democratic candidates, 2007-2008



How did elected Democratic officeholders line up in 2008's nomination contest? Figure 3 displays the cumulative monthly endorsements for the major Democratic candidates in that nomination contest. The Democrats' successes in 2006 meant that there were a total of 322

Democratic governors, Senators, and House members in 2008. By January 3, the day Iowa kicked off the primary season, Senator Hillary Clinton led the pack with 86 endorsements to Senator Barack Obama's 38. No other candidate came close to Clinton and Obama. The earliest contests of 2008 represented a split decision, unlike Kerry's early wins in 2004. Obama won the Iowa caucus and South Carolina primary, while Clinton won the New Hampshire primary and Nevada caucus. However, Obama, not Clinton, became the clear beneficiary in terms of endorsements once voting began. From January 3 until the final contests in early June, Clinton received only 28 more endorsements from our elected officials despite her former position as the presumptive nominee, her connections to party elites from her time as First Lady, and her appeals to Democratic superdelegates—party leaders and elected officials with an automatic, uncommitted vote at the national convention. Obama, in contrast, received the bulk of his endorsements during this period. While Clinton was the clear leader in endorsements entering the primary voting, those who had not endorsed as of the start of the primary season were perhaps waiting to see what would happen once the party's voters had a chance to express their preference. Given that Clinton's 2008 campaign rested, in part, on perceptions of her nomination's inevitability, Obama's early wins in Iowa and South Carolina and his successes in subsequent primaries may have made these officials reluctant to support her candidacy over Obama's. Note that the flow of endorsements was not a steady one; Obama won large numbers of endorsements between January and February, but relatively few after that until the final weeks of the primary race, when the fact of his nomination became inarguable.

Figure 4: All endorsements by Democratic elected officials, 2007-2008

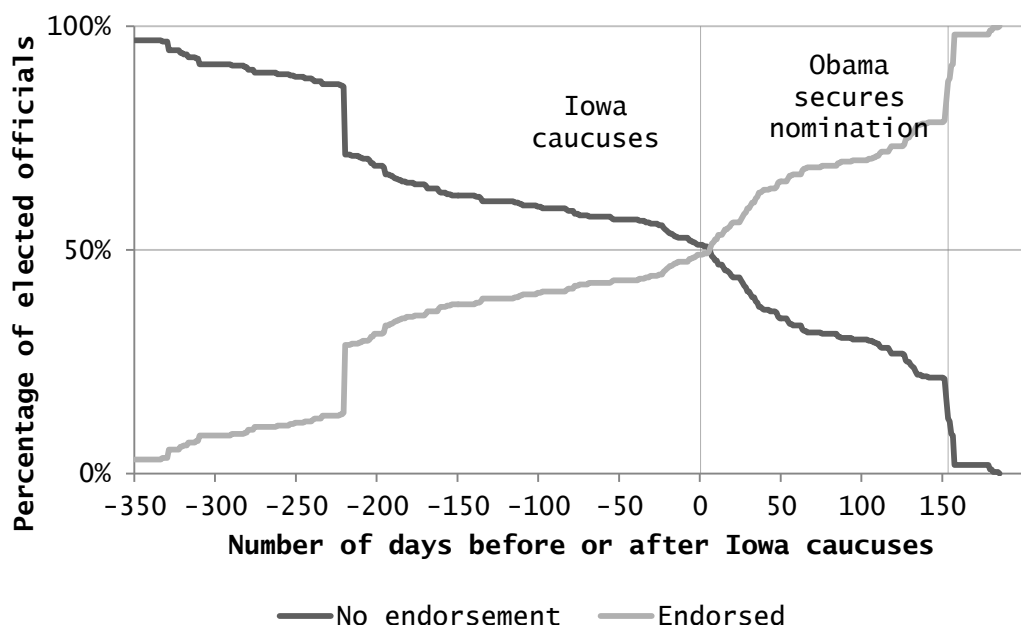
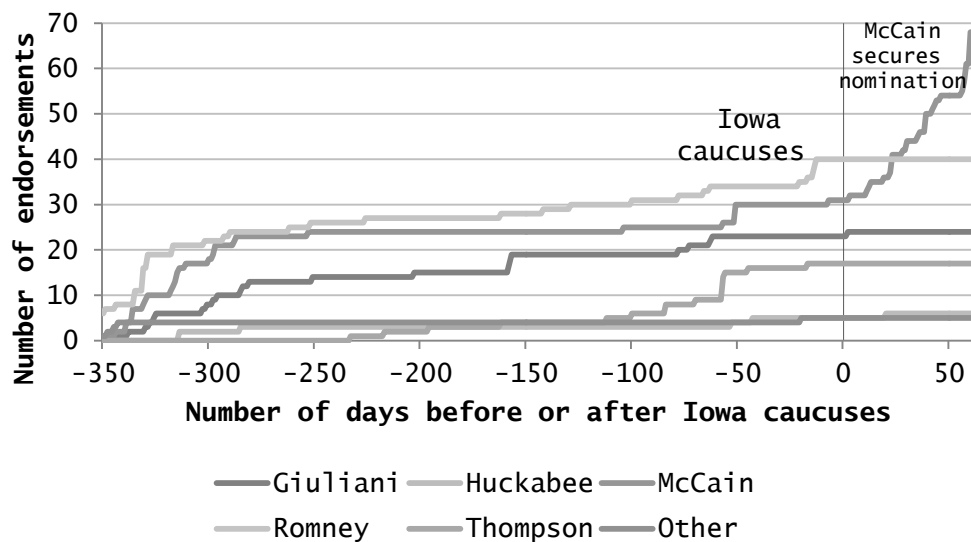


Figure 4 shows the percentage of our elected officials who endorsed throughout the contest, as well as the percentage of elected officials who had not yet endorsed. As in 2004, we see that roughly half of our universe of elected officials endorsed a candidate before the first primary voting, while half waited to endorse until the voters had a chance to speak. For Clinton, her pre-Iowa endorsements represented the bulk of the support she was likely to receive from our elected officials in the absence of clear and convincing wins in the earliest stages of the nomination contest. But it seems clear that the Democrats who waited and then endorsed Obama decided to do so as a result of his early victories. Had Clinton swept the early contests, many of these Democrats would probably have fallen in line behind Clinton.

How do these Democratic races compare to those of the Republicans? Figures 5 and 6 show the endorsements made by the 271 Republican House members, governors, and Senators in their party's 2008 contest, when John McCain defeated a large field of candidates seeking to succeed outgoing President George W. Bush. However, by time of the Iowa caucuses on January 3, 2008, the endorsement leader was not McCain but former Massachusetts Governor Mitt

Romney, who had 40 endorsements to McCain's 31. Former United States Senator and *Law & Order* district attorney Fred Thompson had 17. When the voting began, former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee won the Iowa caucuses, while McCain won the New Hampshire and South Carolina primaries. The response to these wins by our universe of elected officials is telling.

Figure 5: Elected officials' endorsements of Republican candidates, 2007-2008



Huckabee's Iowa win did not translate into a surge of additional endorsements; indeed, the overall lack of support for his campaign from his party's sitting elected officials is striking. Huckabee began 2008 with five endorsements from our elected officials, and ended his campaign with six. In other words, his success in Iowa did not win him support from elected officials; whatever their reasons for not supporting him before voting started were, those reasons clearly outweighed any impact his Iowa victory may have had on their estimations of his candidacy. McCain, however, greatly benefitted from his wins in New Hampshire and South Carolina: Across January and February, his total endorsements rose to 57. Romney, despite his previous endorsement lead, victory in Michigan, and second-place finish in New Hampshire, received only one endorsement from our elected officials during this period. The different outcomes for

Huckabee and McCain are instructive: McCain clearly met a threshold of issue acceptability and electoral viability that, to 2008's elected officials, Huckabee did not. To our universe of Republican officeholders, not all primaries and caucus victories are created equal.

Figure 6: All endorsements by Republican elected officials, 2007-2008

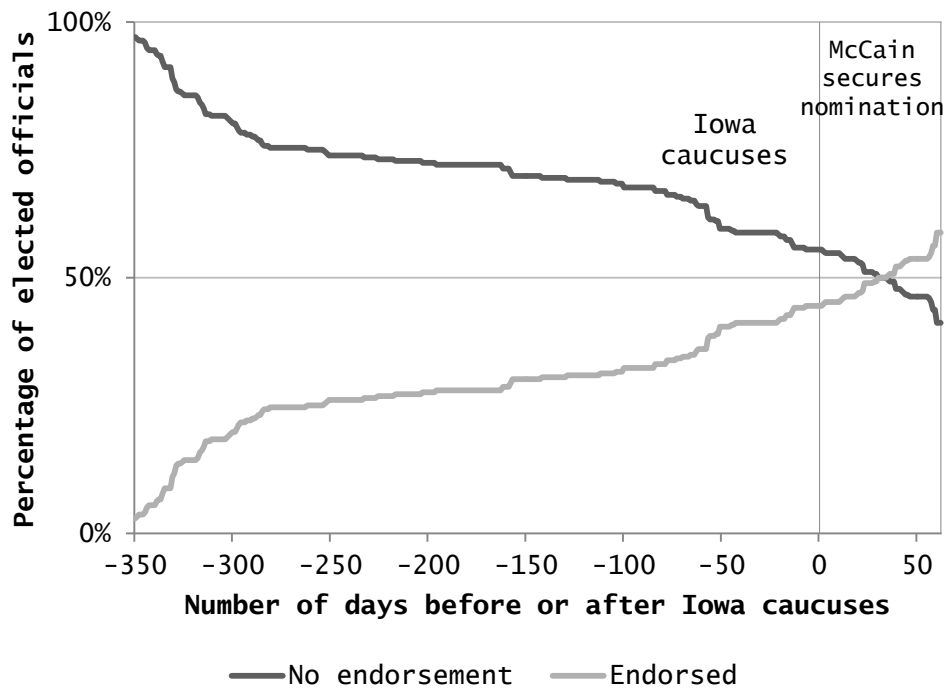
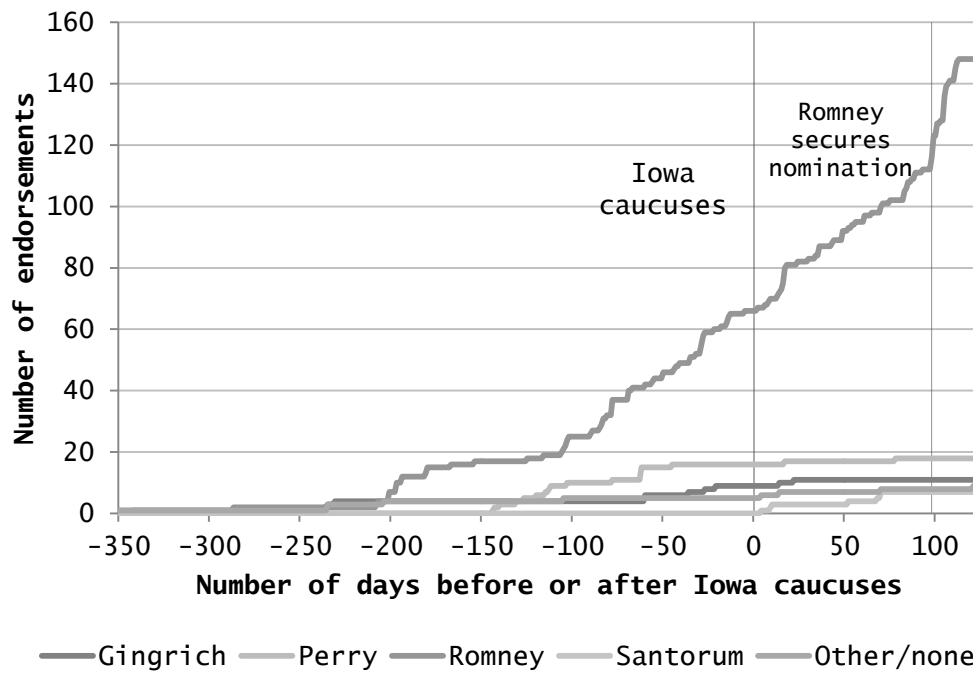
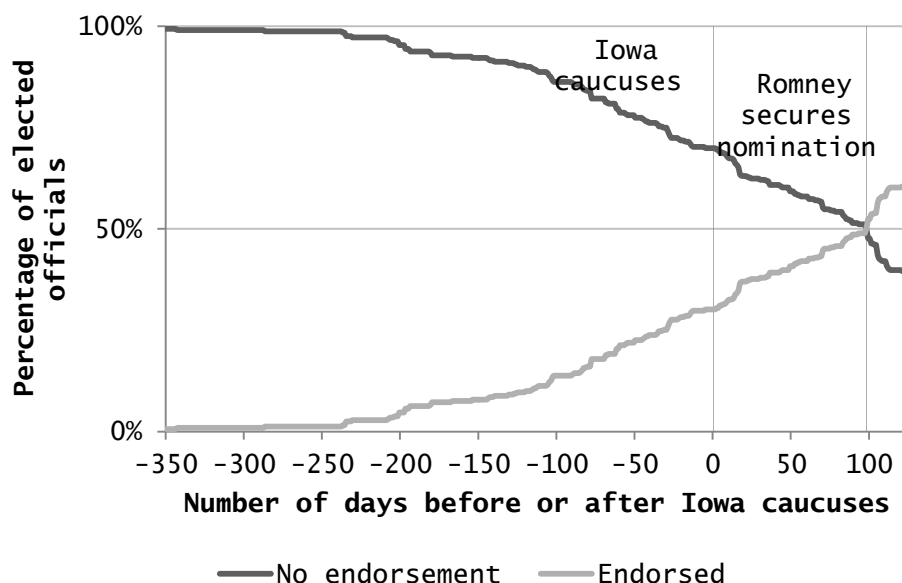


Figure 6 shows the percentage of our universe of elected officials who endorsed throughout the contest, as well as the percentage of elected officials who had not yet endorsed. Compared to the Democrats' 2004 and 2008 contests, Republican elected officials in 2008 were slower to endorse a candidate. It was not until February 2, almost a month after voting began, that half of our elected officials made endorsements. And where almost 70% of elected officials endorsed a candidate by the end of the 2004 Democratic race, and nearly every elected official made an endorsement in 2008's lengthy Obama-Clinton contest, just under 55% of Republican elected officials made an endorsement before John McCain secured the Republican nomination in 2008. This suggests that Republicans were for the most part content to leave the decision about a nominee to their party's rank-and-file primary voters and caucus-goers.

Figure 7: Elected officials' endorsements of Democratic candidates, 2011-2012

Figures 7 and 8 show the endorsements made by the 319 Republican House members, governors, and Senators in the 2012 nomination contest, in which a large field of candidates competed for the chance to oppose President Obama's bid for a second term. This was also the Republicans' first presidential nominating contest since the rise of the Tea Party, which proved a disruptive force in elections in 2009 and 2010. The Tea Party was alternately credited with helping Republicans win control of the House of Representatives and many gubernatorial seats in 2010, as well as with costing them winnable Senate seats in Colorado, Delaware, Nevada, and other states in 2010. The Tea Party also took credit for a number of primary challenges that ended the careers of mainstream conservatives like Utah's Senator Bob Bennett and, later in 2012, Indiana's Richard Lugar. As a result, many elected officials may have made their endorsement decisions with an eye toward the potential the Tea Party had to challenge them in their own primaries.

Figure 8: All endorsements by Democratic elected officials, 2011-2012



Romney easily led all other candidates in the endorsement race heading into 2012, with 66 endorsements by the day of the Iowa caucuses. He lost Iowa by a handful of votes to former Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania and won the New Hampshire primary by a wide margin, but these victories did not bring the same sort of support expressed in the form of endorsements that we saw in previous contests. Romney would receive just 40 additional endorsements by the time he secured the Republican nomination on April 10. It was only then that many more Republicans came off the fence and declared their support for his candidacy. An earlier analysis of 2012 found that Republican elite actors' declarations of support for Romney tended to follow increases in Romney's pledged delegate total and his standing in surveys of primary voters (Parsneau and Galdieri 2014). Figure 8 shows the percentage of our elected officials who endorsed throughout the 2012 contest, as well as the percentage of elected officials who had not yet endorsed. In 2012 it was not until April 10—the same day Romney finally secured the nomination—that a majority of our Republican elected officials had endorsed a candidate.

Figure 9: Elected officials' endorsements of Democratic candidates, 2015-2016

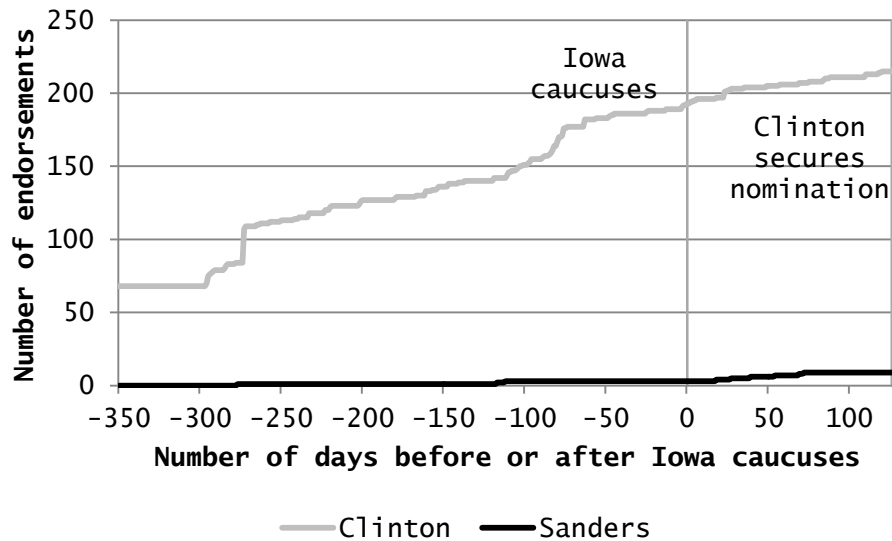
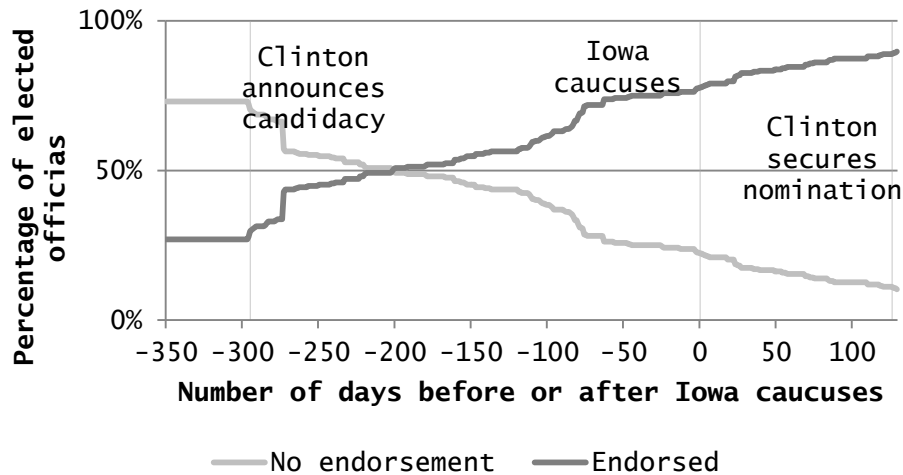


Figure 10: All endorsements by Democratic elected officials, 2015-2016



Our analysis ends with a look at the 2016 nomination contests. For the Democrats, elected officials lined up behind Hillary Clinton earlier, and to a greater extent, than in any of the other contests examined in this paper. As in 2008, Clinton was the clear endorsement leader headed into the primary season. But in 2016 her advantage was much greater than it had been eight years prior. Over a quarter of the 252 elected officials had already publicly committed to support her before she formally announced her candidacy. By the time Iowa caucused, over three-quarters of officials had committed to Clinton. And nearly 90 percent had done so by the

end of the primaries. Democratic elites weighed in heavily for Clinton before and during 2016, and this support helped clear the field of potential competitors like Vice President Joe Biden and Senator Elizabeth Warren. Some potential rivals, like Senators Kirsten Gillibrand of New York and Mark Warner of Virginia, committed to Clinton very early on. As a result, the only persistent challenge to Clinton came from Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, the longtime independent and self-described democratic socialist. While Sanders met with far more success in the primaries than most observers expected when he began his campaign, including a 22-point win in the New Hampshire primary, he received minimal support from elected officials, in part because there was so little uncommitted support left to be had by the time voting began, and in part because despite her losses, Clinton maintained a lead in the delegate count throughout the primaries. Elites influenced the outcome by committing early to Clinton and dissuading other credible challengers from seeking the nomination.

Figure 11: Elected officials' endorsements of Republican candidates, 2015-2016

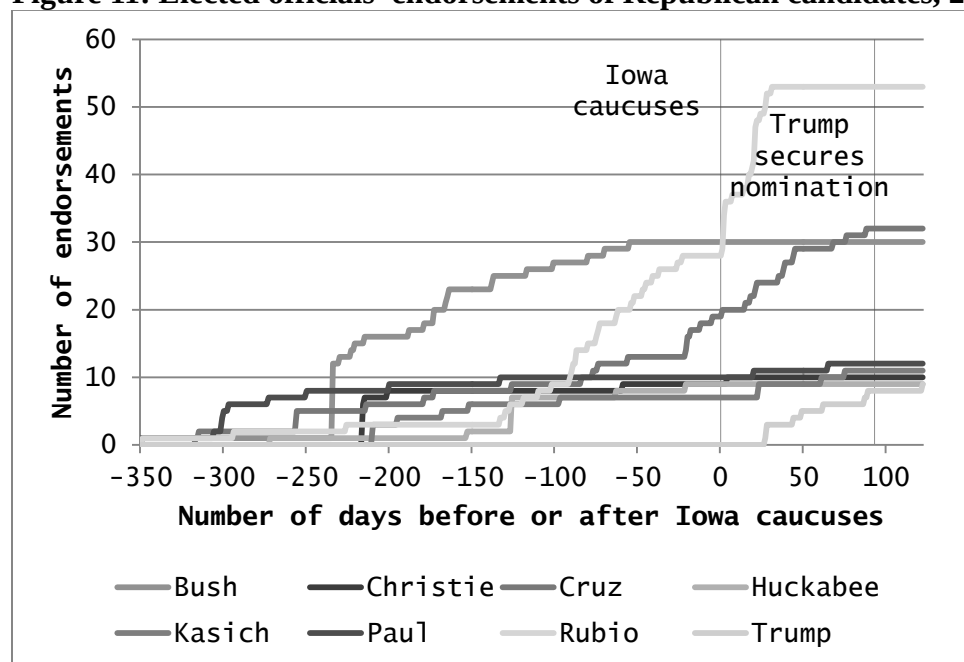
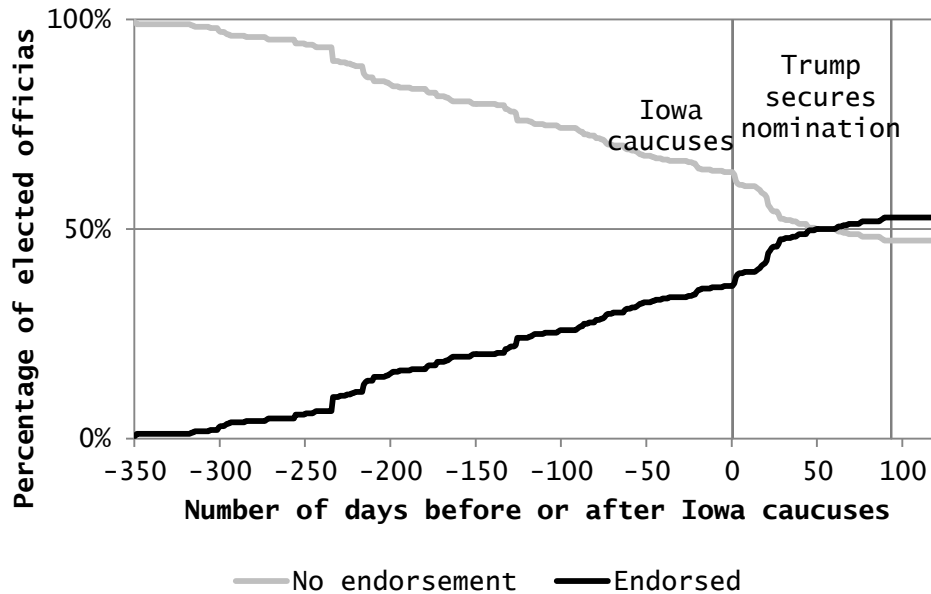


Figure 12: All endorsements by Republican elected officials, 2015-2016



Republican officeholders, in contrast, demonstrated an inability to coordinate on a preferred candidate. This failure led to the nomination of Donald Trump, the real estate mogul turned reality television star turned Barack Obama birthplace conspiracist. Trump entered the race with fanfare and high recognition but was taken seriously by few. However, he dominated press coverage of the race, many of the debates among Republican candidates, and, by the fall of 2015, most polling about the Republican primary contest. In spite of his rise, elected Republicans were divided. By the time voting began in Iowa, only slightly more than a third of officials had endorsed a candidate. The leader, headed into Iowa, was Jeb Bush, but his position was more precarious than it looked. Bush had proven an awkward campaigner and had difficulty responding to attacks from Trump during debates, and his endorsement support had flatlined weeks before Iowa. Once voting began, many officials endorsed Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, who had placed third in Iowa but had been marked as a potential presidential contender even before his election to the Senate in 2010. But elite support for Rubio did not translate into rank-and-file support; after being badly beaten by Trump in the Florida primary, Rubio ended his

campaign. At this point, elite support shifted to Senator Ted Cruz of Texas out of necessity, since he was a distant second to Trump in the pledged delegate count and many in the party hoped that a strong Cruz showing in late primaries could deprive Trump of a first-ballot convention victory and lead a more palatable candidate to be nominated on a later ballot. When Trump defeated Cruz in the Indiana primary, these convention dreams ended and Trump became the presumptive nominee. Trump did so with minimal support from elected Republicans; by the Indiana primary, he was the public, first-choice preference of just eight of the elected officials examined. Once Trump secured the nomination, many in the party continued to keep their distance. Some offered only tepid endorsements, others pledged to support the Republican nominee but not endorse Trump, and some have outright refused to support Trump. Many announced that they would skip the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, and few expressed interest in serving as Trump's running mate. These are not just the actions of party actors who would have preferred another candidate; they are the actions of party actors who think their nominee has done great damage to their party, and that the worst is yet to come.

Given their view of him as politically radioactive, why were Republican elites unable to stop Trump and lead rank-and-file party members to the conclusion they had reached? At least part of the blame lies with the size of the Republican field, the largest in modern history, which debate sponsors had to split into two groups in order to manage the primary debates. With so many candidates, there were multiple candidates who, meeting nearly any set of personal and professional characteristics, a Republican might desire in a potential nominee: Blue-state governor (Christie, Walker), swing-state official (Bush, Kasich, Rubio), Texan (Cruz, Perry), nonwhite Gulf Coast official (Cruz, Jindal, Rubio), governors who had held office on 9/11 (Gilmore, Pataki), outsider who had never held office (Trump, Carson, Fiorina), and so on.

Throughout 2015, the large field may have encouraged elected officials to wait for some external event to narrow the field. But each elected official who waited passed up a chance to influence other elected officials' decisions about whether and whom to endorse. This in turn led the early caucuses and primaries to hold even greater importance than they normally do. This was particularly devastating for Marco Rubio's campaign; had the elite shift toward him come months before Iowa, that elite support may well have encouraged other candidates to leave the race and put Rubio in a stronger position to challenge Trump.

Discussion

In comparing these six nomination contests, at least one distinction between the parties is clear. In Democratic nomination contests, a sizeable proportion of the party's elected officials are willing to support a candidate early in the process. In 2004 and 2008, half of the party's elected officials made an endorsement before or just after the first caucus took place in Iowa, while most of the rest declared their support for a candidate during or after the competitive stage of the nomination contest. In 2016, half of elected officials had made an endorsement months in advance of the Iowa caucuses, and nearly all of those endorsements were for Hillary Clinton.

But for many Republicans in 2008, 2012, and 2016, endorsing a candidate appears, based on timing, to have been something many elected officials chose to avoid or put off for as long as possible. This may have been due to of the divisions within the Republican Party between the party establishment and the grassroots movement that became the Tea Party movement by 2010, or due to each of those contests' eventual nominees. Both John McCain and Mitt Romney had past heterodox issue positions (on taxes, immigration, and climate change in McCain's case, and on abortion, gay rights, and health care in Romney's) that dogged them throughout their primary campaigns and required them to convince party actors and activists that they could be trusted on

these issues should they become president. These same issue positions may have made some elected officials reluctant to endorse either candidate any sooner than party loyalty required them to. By the end of 2008's nomination contest, only slightly more than half of this analysis' universe of elected Republican officials had endorsed any candidate; by the end of 2012's contest, just half of elected Republicans had endorsed a candidate. The same was true in 2016, despite many elected officials' widespread concerns about Trump. These comparatively low levels of public participation in their party's nomination contests suggests that Republican elected officials, considered as a class, are more concerned with the potential impact of an endorsement on their own political prospects than are their Democratic counterparts.

Consider the 2012 race: Many of Romney's eventual endorsers waited until after he had secured the nomination to make their support official, despite the weaknesses and liabilities of his field of challengers. The rise of the Tea Party, and the threat many elected officials may have felt a Tea Party primary challenger could pose to their electoral goals, combined with many rank and file Republicans' perceptions of Romney as uncertainly conservative, may well explain why some of these elected officials chose to remain publicly uncommitted for as long as possible, and waited to commit to Romney until he had already secured the nomination. Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, who endorsed Romney late in March, for instance, prefaced his endorsement by saying it was "evidently increasingly clear that Mitt Romney's going to be the nominee" and stating that Romney had "earned" the nomination with his primary victories (Jennings 2012). This is not the language of someone trying to deliver voters to a candidate. Instead, Rubio presents Romney's nomination as something that Romney and primary voters have made to happen; Rubio himself, his language suggests, is simply acknowledging the facts of the matter.

In considering intellectual questions, what is not present is often as noteworthy as what is

present (Doyle 1894). That is the case in the nomination contests examined here. In all but one of these races, there was no point at which large numbers of party actors intervened to counter the preferences expressed by rank-and-file party members in early primaries and caucuses. While pre-reform contests often featured last-minute attempts to stop a candidate many party actors found objectionable—William Scranton's late entry against Barry Goldwater in 1964 (Matthews 1997), or the credentials battles that were a proxy fight between McGovern supporters and opponents in 1972 (Thompson 1973)—such efforts have been notably muted in the reformed nominating system. In 2008, as the Obama campaign inched closer and closer to the nomination, the Clinton campaign's appeals to superdelegates were by and large ignored. Antiwar Democrats did not try to unify behind an alternative to John Kerry in 2004, and social conservative Republicans' efforts to derail the nominations of John McCain and Mitt Romney were fleeting and ineffective.

The one sustained effort to prevent a candidate's nomination during the primaries took place in 2016, when elites tried to get behind first Marco Rubio and then Ted Cruz in an attempt to deny Donald Trump the nomination. But elite support for these candidates did not translate into primary and caucus victories. Had that support come earlier in the contest, the outcome may have been different. But the large field of candidates complicated coordination efforts, and the simple fact of the size of the 2016 Republican primary field is one that will merit further analysis. In most years, many potential candidates test the waters for their candidacy and then decline to run. In 2008, when Democrats felt they had a good chance of winning the White House after two terms of George W. Bush, figures like former nominees Al Gore and John Kerry considered running but did not, as did Senators Evan Bayh and Russ Feingold and former governor Mark Warner; former Iowa governor Tom Vilsack briefly ran but ended his campaign

well before voting began. Each of these men decided that, for whatever reasons, running for president was simply not worth it. But in 2016, a similar process did not play out for Republicans. Instead, nearly every figure in the party mentioned as a possible candidate decided to run, along with several individuals who had never held office. This large field, we suggest, complicated efforts of party elites to decide on which candidate to support. As a result, the 2016 Republican contest joined the previous Republican nomination contests, as well as the 2004 and 2008 contests for the Democrats, as one in which early contest results played a significant role in determining the outcome. More than any other eventual nominee in the six races studied here, Donald Trump could not have won the Republican nomination without placing second in Iowa and winning in New Hampshire and South Carolina.

Trump's nomination is so significant because he was so disliked and mistrusted by so many Republican elites. While he proved to have a sizable constituency among rank-and-file voters, he entirely lacked one among party actors, in part because he expressed issue positions that were out of step with those of party elites, and in part because many elites viewed him as unelectable in his own right and dangerous to downticket Republicans.

Viewed in the aggregate, these races do suggest that presidential nominations since 2000 have, with the possible exception of 2016's Democratic contest, been the result of a more complicated process than simply party actors deciding on their candidate and the voters dutifully ratifying that choice in the primaries and caucuses. Instead, in many of these cases the public decisions of party actors followed, rather than preceded, the first rank-and-file balloting. And in these cases shifts of small numbers of votes could have led to different victors in Iowa, New Hampshire, and other early states. The early contests are often described as influential in part because they provide voters in states that vote later in the process with crucial information about

the candidates (Redlawsk, Tolbert and Donovan 2011). Our findings suggest that the earliest contests can serve a similar role for elite actors. In crowded contests where multiple generally acceptable candidates are seeking a nomination and have roughly similar levels of elite actor support, such as the 2004 Democratic field that included John Kerry, John Edwards, Wesley Clark, and Dick Gephardt, as well as early front-runner Howard Dean, the decisions of rank-and-file voters in early states provided useful information to party actors. Party actors unable to decide between multiple acceptable candidates may use early results to make inferences about candidate quality, and assume that winning in Iowa and New Hampshire and beyond indicates that candidates are skilled at campaigning, developing appealing campaign themes, organizing a large campaign organization, and navigating the demands and priorities of constituencies within the party. But the lack of support elite actors show for anyone other than the winners of early contests suggest that these inferences are no less rooted in media impressions, and no more informed by insider savvy, than those made by voters. Had Edwards or Clark or Gephardt won the early Democratic contests in 2004, the party actors who then came out for Kerry would likely have done so for that winner instead. Had Dean, of whom many elite Democratic actors were wary, won in both Iowa and New Hampshire, many of those reluctant party actors may have found that his electoral success outweighed their reservations; others may have tried to rally behind an alternative, but the experience of Republicans trying to derail Trump's nomination in 2016 demonstrates the high bar such an effort would have had to clear. Had Obama not won in Iowa and South Carolina in 2008, the party actors who came out in favor of him throughout the months that followed very likely would have happily gotten in line behind Clinton instead. Objectively speaking, a candidate who wins an early contest by a small number of votes has not necessarily demonstrated that much more skill and quality than the candidate coming in second.

Similarly, a delegate won in the first primary counts, at the party convention, no more or less than a delegate won in the last primary. But if there are elite party actors who would make these and other, similar distinctions, they are elite party actors not included in our data set. In the cases of Huckabee and Santorum, their failures to turn their Iowa success into subsequent party actor support may have been the result of their inability to place better than a distant third or fourth, respectively, in New Hampshire's primary.

These findings do not invalidate the school of thought that holds that party actors, despite the reforms made to the nomination system, influence the outcome of nomination battles. But these findings do complicate that picture. In the contests analyzed, the early primary and caucus results are not simply ratifications of elite decisions. Instead, they should be viewed as one of the first rounds of the nomination. Doing well brings candidates not just delegates but support from fence-sitting party actors. Absent overwhelming elite support for one candidate, then, candidates in both parties would be wise to behave as if they were running in a year in which early state voters will make the first real move in determining the outcome of the nomination contest. While the party does tend to decide nomination contests, in many recent contests the first step in the party's decision process appears to be waiting to see what voters have to say. More often than not, in recent presidential elections, much of the party stands aside.

This is not a costless decision for party elites. It is a welcome development if one believes that nominations should be decided by rank-and-file party members, with minimal or no input from elite party actors. But those rank-and-file members continue to vote and caucus in a process that is itself shaped by party elites, from the schedule of state contests to the thresholds for winning delegates to nearly every other aspect of the process. More importantly, when elites decide to stand aside, they are, in practice, rarely remaining truly uncommitted. Our analysis of

these nomination contests indicates that elite actors have little appetite for swimming upstream against primary voters' and caucus-goers' preferences, and in the one case where they attempted to do so, they were stunningly unsuccessful. As a result, abstaining from an early endorsement often means committing oneself to support the leading candidate who emerges from the early contests. Whether elite reluctance to commit to a candidate early stems from a respect for the views of the voters or from elected officials' concern with their own electoral prospects, it also undercuts the idea that elite actors bring a perspective to nominating contests that party voters lack. When a party stands aside, it is very likely that its voters will be the ones who decide.

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¹ We include only the first endorsement made by an elected official; an official who endorses Smith in August and switches to Jones in March is coded only for her initial endorsement of Smith. To the extent that the omission of switchers affects our analysis, it does so by understating the size of late swings toward candidates. We also note that the number of switches taking place during a contest tends to be small; a recent analysis of the 2008 Democratic primary race, for instance, found that just 10 of 852 superdelegates switched before the final primaries took place (Kessler 2016).

² Recall that this figure includes only those officials whose first endorsement was for Kerry; as a result, it understates party actors' support for Kerry by omitting supporters of other candidates who switched their support to him.

³ Representative Dennis Kucinich (D-OH) and Rev. Al Sharpton continued their campaigns for quite some time after Kerry cinched the nomination.

⁴ This measure is similar to that used by Cohen et al. (2008) to measure the impact of early endorsements on other aspects of nomination campaigns. Here, however, we are simply concerned with the timing of the point at which half of the endorsements in a given contest have been made, rather than the predictive power of those endorsements.