

2016

Barbara Norrander: The Imperfect Primary

Eddie Colombo
Seton Hall University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/pa>



Part of the [American Politics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Colombo, Eddie (2016) "Barbara Norrander: The Imperfect Primary," *Political Analysis*: Vol. 18 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/pa/vol18/iss1/9>

Barbara Norrander: The Imperfect Primary

Eddie Colombo

“Presidential nominations are a political process. Politics is neither efficient nor rational.¹ Barbara Norrander, a University of Arizona professor, attempts to highlight why nominating presidential candidates in the United States presents a set of unique and troubling circumstances for the American electorate. In her book, *The Imperfect Primary*, Norrander explores the historical significance of American presidential nominations, along with the inherent “oddities, biases, and strengths” of the nominating process.² Norrander also judges proposed reforms to this imperfect system by identifying the supposed advantages, and disadvantages to modifying the political process. Although *The Imperfect Primary* proves relevant in the current election environment, many of Norrander’s critiques remain not only historically, but presently significant. Norrander outlines a clear lineage of how the presidential nomination developed, reformed, and how those modifications created a biased, imperfect system of selection that can be critiqued further.

Historically speaking, the United States presidential nominee selection process began with no clear guidance. “The U.S. Constitution does not cover how candidates would be nominated for the presidency or any other office.”³ The lack of legal mandate outlining a candidate’s nomination for the nation’s highest office, forced states and political parties to determine the process through trial and error. The founding fathers first attempt at nominating candidates began in 1796, when congressional caucuses

¹ Norrander, Barbara. *The Imperfect Primary: Oddities, Biases and Strengths of U.S. Presidential Nomination Politics (Controversies in Electoral Democracy and Representation)*. Routledge. 2012. 159.

² Ibid: 152

³ Ibid: 9

debated amongst party elected officials to determine presidential nominees.⁴ The two candidates would necessarily compete for 50 percent of the Electoral College vote, guaranteeing the presidency.⁵ The process advantaged party elites holding clout in Congress, however following the controversial election of John Quincy Adams by Congress, the nomination process necessarily shifted to political party national conventions. “The convention system transferred party power from the national legislature to the state parties.”⁶ This example of federalism primarily allowed state parties, and state delegates to influence elections at a national convention. These delegates were required to nominate a candidate through a series of contested ballots, highlighting the tedious process of party factions compromising on each ballot to elect a consensus nominee.⁷ An entirely internal process between party elites, left little room for voter influence, leading to reform the “internal bargaining” that discouraged “preconvention campaigning.”⁸ The disdain against party “bosses” cherry-picking a candidate, and advocating for more public participation steered American political culture towards presidential primaries.⁹

These primaries were direct, meaning the candidate winning a plurality of votes automatically secured the party’s nomination.¹⁰ In the aftermath of World War II candidates won primaries to show the ability to sway voters into their camps to gain delegates, however party leaders at conventions still held the decisive majority delegate

⁴ Ibid: 10
⁵ Ibid:10
⁶ Ibid: 11
⁷ Ibid: 12
⁸ Ibid: 12
⁹ Ibid: 13
¹⁰ Ibid: 13

vote.¹¹ Advocates for the primary system noted the increased public impact, reduced corruption, and a way for indirect democracy to influence primary elections.¹² These slight delineations in the nominating process pale in comparison to the creation of the modern selection method, courtesy of the McGovern-Fraser Commission. After the highly divisive 1968 Democratic convention led to riots in Chicago, the political process was altered to ensure equal representation among delegates, open and welcoming primaries, and fairer allocation of delegates.¹³ These sweeping reforms in 1972 led to America's modern nomination practice, where states choose a majority of convention delegates, and the majority of states hold presidential primaries that directly allocate a portion of delegates to a candidate.¹⁴ The main reform from congressional congress was the belief that "primaries were now the method for candidates to have their own supporters elected as convention delegates."¹⁵ The amount of reform demonstrated in this 200 year historical period outlines the difficulties and potential problems nominating a candidate for the presidency. These clear difficulties present in the United States' current system of nominating a president led Barbara Norrande to identify the fairness of the convoluted tradition.

Norrande highlights the current biases of the existing nominating system by painstakingly citing an increasingly polarized electorate, the influence of Super PACs, the significance of the primary calendar, and the emphasis placed on individual media coverage stressing the personal "horse race" between candidates.¹⁶ The dominant

¹¹ Ibid: 15

¹² Ibid: 14

¹³ Ibid: 19

¹⁴ Ibid: 12

¹⁵ Ibid: 24

¹⁶ Ibid: 25

criticism presented throughout *The Imperfect Primary*, remains the lack of a “uniform set of primary rules nor a standardized calendar of dates exist, because primary dates and rules are governed by the national parties, state parties, and state governments.”¹⁷ These three political “organizations” contribute to the lack of consistency needed for a more impartial and successful presidential nominating system. Primary rules differ significantly between Democrats and Republicans, resulting in a completely different set of procedures to nominate candidates ultimately running for the same office. This huge difference in political party practice demands a deeper analysis into the process behind electing a nominee. Republicans allow ten delegates per state, three delegates for each seat in Congress, and more delegates based on a state’s population.¹⁸ Consequently Democrats allocate delegates based on Electoral College representation, popular vote in previous presidential elections, bonus delegates for complying with various party pleas, and unpledged “superdelegates.”¹⁹ Norrander notes the allocation of delegates disadvantages larger states unfairly, because their delegates represent more significant populations than smaller states.²⁰ “Fair” in Norrander’s view necessarily means that each delegate corresponds to the same number of potential voters. Both Democratic and Republican parties fail in “fairness”, because they lessen the voting power of more significant presidential nominating populations. Even more biased, the Democratic Party has a significant portion of its delegates that are unpledged party leaders and elected officials that “are not required to vote for presidential candidates based on the results of

¹⁷ Ibid: 29

¹⁸ Ibid: 79

¹⁹ Ibid: 79

²⁰ Ibid: 81

the primaries or caucuses in their states.”²¹ These superdelegates are not beholden to the democratic process of selecting a nominee and could significantly influence a close election, considering in 2012 they comprised 13 percent of the Democratic delegates.²² The lack of equal state influence, and outside party delegates contribute to the bias held throughout the presidential primary system.

Although the incongruent party rules factor in the biased selection process, the primary and caucus calendars also contribute to possible breaches in a fair and equal election process. Norrander identifies the excessive attention paid to New Hampshire and Iowa as clear violations of a fair process.²³ The two states represent ethnically homogenous states that are not representative of the country as a whole.²⁴ The precedent set by Iowa, and New Hampshire led multiple other states to “front load” the nomination calendar in order to gain increased power, money, and influence.²⁵ The effects of front loading the primary schedule cause increased expenditures in early states, candidates eliminated earlier in the process, and states at the end of primary calendars to have limited or no say at all in their party’s nominee.²⁶ The front loaded primaries not only affects the voters, but also requires the candidates to raise more money even earlier in the primary schedule. “Candidates unable to keep up with these rising costs of the campaign are unable to compete effectively.”²⁷ This type of scheduling places emphasis on winning early, campaigning in initial nominating states to gain momentum, and wrap up the nomination as quickly and swiftly as possible to conserve cash. Evidence shows that

²¹ Ibid: 85

²² Ibid: 85

²³ Ibid: 107

²⁴ Ibid: 108-109

²⁵ Ibid: 109

²⁶ Ibid: 109

²⁷ Ibid: 110

only Bill Clinton was able to secure a presidential nomination without winning Iowa, or New Hampshire even though both states have small populations that do not represent America's voting electorate.²⁸ This contradicts conventional wisdom to focus on more important primaries with more delegates at stake. Rudy Giuliani attempted to skip Iowa and New Hampshire, in favor of campaigning in Florida a "front loaded" primary state possessing more delegates to gain momentum. However missing out on the two earliest nominating states proved to be Giuliani's death sentence, collapsing his campaign with a third place finish in Florida.²⁹ Giuliani's failed attempt at the Republican nomination highlights the unfair importance to states that unrepresentatively alter the number of candidates, the momentum of candidates, and unduly influence the eventual nominee just by "arbitrarily" having the power to set their primaries first, because the Constitution makes no mention of regulating the process.

In addition to the intricacies of party nomination rules, and the inherent bias presented by the nomination calendar, money and media play a significant role in who ultimately becomes President of the United States. Campaign finance in the modern age has led candidates to decline federal money, because of the restrictions attached, and opt for increased funding by Super PACs.³⁰ Although this new form of financial influence remains "independent" of the candidate's campaign, they own little oversight in what is published, ultimately leading to more negative ads. Candidates with the most significant backing, have a clear advantage over lesser funded, but perhaps better overall candidates. The amount of money a candidate possesses in their "war chest" can seriously influence the public's ultimate decision. A campaign can affect voter turnout, public opinion polls,

²⁸ Ibid: 55

²⁹ Ibid: 53

³⁰ Ibid: 94

and media coverage simply by the amount of money they possess. This unfairly eliminates possibly more qualified candidates from running because they lack sufficient funds. The media also greatly influence presidential nomination cycles, by taking the focus away from issues between candidates and onto the “horse race.”³¹ “In a study of media coverage of the 2012 Republican race, 64 percent of stories focused on the horse race, while only 10 percent covered issues.”³² This statistic Norrande provides highlights a flaw in the political process, media is not officially party affiliated, therefore has no true interest in who wins the race. The interest of media magnates stems from the competitiveness of the races, naturally if a voter views the race as closer they will be more likely to pay attention to the news networks, resulting in increased viewership and revenue. Focusing on the race over issues has also led media coverage of candidates to be negative, attacking perceived frontrunners to make the race more competitive and interesting.³³ The media will never be corralled by the candidates, or parties because their interests differ significantly. However the media consistently provides undue influence and bias on the campaign trail. Clearly the media possesses massive power by declaring the winners of primaries, covering rising poll numbers, and airing advertisements supplied by Super PACs.³⁴ Undoubtedly money and media factor significantly into the presidential nomination process, even though both are perceived as outside the rules and procedures of deciding presidential nominees.

At length Norrande discusses the pitfalls, biases, and inconsistencies presented throughout an ever changing presidential nomination process. Contrary to perceived

³¹ Ibid: 95

³² Ibid: 95

³³ Ibid: 95

³⁴ Ibid: 95

political rhetoric, the United States primary routine presents strengths that reformers have attempted to build around. The current process allows multiple groups to impact the political process; the candidates themselves, the media, donors, pundits, and voters all attempt to determine the most qualified candidate for president.³⁵ Multiple opinions and observations lead to highly scrutinizing the candidates, vetting potentially unqualified or extreme candidates.³⁶ Existing election protocol decisively determines a winner, if a candidate wins greater than 50 percent of party delegates, they become the party's nominee. There are no runoffs, and little controversies are involved in the current climate of electing a president, the candidates know what it takes to win and set out to capture as many delegates and votes as possible. The primaries also promote a culture of debate within the two major parties. Candidates jockeying for position may ascend in polls based on passionate debate performances, or creative policy solutions to existing problems. Contemporary campaigning encourages competition, passion, and effort, all facets of a primary philosophy that elects the seemingly best and most qualified candidates. Clearly there are many downfalls to the United States current political culture, however these downfalls are supplemented by outright advantages that allow the public to determine their eventual nominee.

The Imperfect Primary demonstrates a truly flawed, broken, and imperfect system of electing future presidents. Identifying the issues, commenting on the corruption, and recognizing reforms is a good start to restructuring the present day political process. In Chapter four of *The Imperfect Primary*, Norrander analyzes possible solutions to the nomination process. Various resolutions are presented yet fail under intense scrutiny. As

³⁵ Ibid: 157

³⁶ Ibid: 157

recently as 2007, Congress attempted to pass “the Regional Presidential Primary and Caucus Act of 2007.”³⁷ A plan emphasizing regional clusters, coupled with a lottery system randomizing regional order.³⁸ Critics present counterarguments to this reform proposal, stating candidate fundraising would still need to remain high, if a candidate wins one region he or she could conceivably eliminate the majority of the field, and regional primacy would only occur once every 16 years.³⁹ Although reforms like regional primaries seem more beneficial, in order to enact them would be quite difficult. The lack of Constitutional guidance inhibits Congress from enacting reform, “the Constitution only mentions Congress regulating the date for choosing the electors for the Electoral College, leaving the manner of selecting these electors up to the states.”⁴⁰ Coincidentally reform of the election process would most likely originate from the political parties themselves, because they have a first amendment right of association, or state legislators lawfully regulating the election process.⁴¹ This would require widespread consensus from the political entities in power to truly ameliorate a broken system.

Although reform seems unlikely, given the tradition and special interests of parties and legislatures in power, theoretically change is possible. The American electorate deserves a more streamlined, fair, and honest election process where the public’s opinion matters. According to Norrander’s possible reform methods there are ways to alter the system without drastically overhauling the entire process.

Throughout *The Imperfect Primary*, Norrander critiques campaign finance, the advantages of early nomination, and inherent bias among delegate selection. In order to

³⁷ Ibid: 111

³⁸ Ibid: 110

³⁹ Ibid: 112

⁴⁰ Ibid: 126

⁴¹ Ibid: 126

resolve campaign finance, parties could enact strict time frames to solicit donations, only six months prior to the first presidential primary. No money raised before would be eligible for expenditure, this would be regulated by the Federal Election Commission. This would curb the power of the “invisible primary” season where frontrunner candidates can outraise and outspend lesser competitors.⁴² Furthermore candidates with less financial clout, would compete within similar windows to garner monetary support.

In conjunction with monetary reform, Norrander identifies the primary voting method as outdated and in need of adjustment. “In 2013 Gallup polls, 58 percent approved of a one day national primary.”⁴³ The majority of Americans wish for a one day national primary, that allows each state equal representation. However this plan radically alters the current state of affairs in American politics. The national primary can be achieved, will some alterations and methods that currently exist in American politics. American political parties value tradition, and the first four early nominating states deserve to stay at the front of the calendar. During the sixth months prior to the national primary, each Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Nevada would stagger non-binding traditional primaries to gauge interest among the more ethnically diverse electorate. If each primary were held one month apart, the earliest falling four months prior to the one day national primary, it would allow candidates to participate in similar retail politics and fundraise within those areas. Doing well in a non-binding primary would still hold weight in momentum, because news outlets would cover the results as candidates jockeyed for future support in the national primaries. Turnout would decrease, however trusting the voters in early primary states, and their consistent

⁴² Ibid: 41

⁴³ Ibid: 141

traditional respect for nominating first in elections, the reduction would not be overwhelming. Similar to present politics, debates would accompany the early primary season allowing the public to determine candidate's positions and qualifications for the presidency. The process would also winnow the field, those unable to garner significant financial support within the small fundraising window, and those polling poorly in early states would assist in dwindling the field prior to a national primary. These changes would result in an also altered one day national primary process.

Barbara Norrander correspondingly identifies a United States political process that if integrated, could serve to solve the presidential primary dilemma. The Electoral College provides a decisive blueprint on how to carry out conclusive federal elections. Although 63 percent of Gallup poll voters in 2013 supported eliminating the Electoral College, the federal entity demonstrates valuable tradition, a tradition that could sway state and party leaders to alter the current system.⁴⁴ The Electoral College assigns electors "based on its representation in Congress: one elector for each member of the U.S. House of Representatives and two electors to represent every state's two members of the U.S. Senate."⁴⁵ This system could also be used to disseminate delegates, eliminating the practice of superdelegates and party bonuses. The criteria would also factor in population, to allow states with more significant populations more delegates. The delegates would vote by congressional district, rather than by a winner take all state delegate mentality. This process already implemented by Nebraska and Maine would allow multiple districts within one state to be won by different candidates.⁴⁶ The delegates from each state would be held by law to support the popular vote in that

⁴⁴ Ibid: 141

⁴⁵ Ibid: 141

⁴⁶ Ibid: 145

district, and would not have the ability to become “faithless electors” distancing themselves from the districts popular vote.⁴⁷ In the Electoral College a candidate must win 270 of the possible 538 electoral votes, however in this one day national primary multiple candidates could seemingly garner the support of the electorate and therefore a plurality of delegates is necessary to win the nomination. If no plurality exists, the nomination would go to the most popular votes cast for a specific candidate. This system would allow every state ample clout in the process, just as they possess in a typical presidential election.

Reforming the process would culminate in the one day national primary officially listed as semi-closed, allowing political parties to conserve their power in the nominating process, while also allowing unaffiliated or independent voters to vote in one side of the election. The culmination of these modifications would result in a decisively nominated candidate, which traditionally possessed ample time to convince voters in all 50 states of their merits of becoming a party’s nominee. These reforms balance the necessity for change, while attempting to satisfy party elites, and traditionalists.

Barbara Norrander’s *The Imperfect Primary* explicitly identifies the flawed system in which American citizens nominate a presidential candidate. By analyzing political historical trends, process flaws, and malfunctions in the past and present, Norrander theorizes on the possibilities and limitations for reform. Using Norrander’s *The Imperfect Primary* as a resource, permits theoretical discussion of the possible advantages of radical, yet conservative reforms. Modernizing the political process of nominating a presidential candidate may be difficult, but Norrander entertains the possibility. Politics may be inefficient and irrational, but perhaps the founding fathers

⁴⁷ Ibid: 143

wished for this kind of discord allowing no party, state, candidate, or federal government to gain the upper hand in such an imperfect system.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Ibid: 159