

Introduction

Party Elite Survival in Presidential Nominations

Superdelegates should exercise their “independent judgment” in deciding whom to endorse.

—Hillary Clinton, 2008 presidential candidate

Whoever has the most pledged delegates at the end of this contest should be the nominee and . . . superdelegates should ratify that decision by the voters.

—Barack Obama, 2008 presidential candidate

Presidential nomination campaigns have often been described as the most important and least understood phase of presidential selection.¹ In most instances, they begin almost two years before the national party convention convenes. During the lengthy nomination campaign, party elites attempt to influence nomination outcomes through their endorsements of particular candidates. Although elite endorsements are not as powerful as they once were during the time periods when congressional caucuses and party conventions controlled the nomination outcome, they still matter. Presidential candidates actively seek them in an effort to increase their chances of capturing the party nomination. Furthermore, there is ample evidence to suggest that party elite endorsements are determinants of candidate success in presidential nominations.²

The political reforms of the late 1960s and 1970s were intended to promote plebiscitary democracy by shifting power from party bosses to rank-and-file party supporters. While voters have become more

involved in the nomination process since the late 1960s via their participation in presidential primaries and caucuses, there is a growing body of literature suggesting that party elites remain the dominant force in selecting the party's presidential nominee. Some important questions are raised about the presidential nomination process, namely, Who controls the nomination process? Are presidential nominations more party centric or candidate centric? On the one hand, a party centric perspective of party elite behavior would indicate that crucial decisions are made by party insiders. On the other hand, a candidate centric viewpoint suggests that party elite behavior is a function of a candidate's appeal and voter participation.

The manner in which American political parties select their presidential candidates speaks directly to the larger question about how democratic presidential nominations are. If presidential nominations are decided by party insiders before direct voter participation occurs in the primaries and caucuses, then the political reform movement of the late 1960s and 1970s that was designed to democratize the leadership selection process has failed. Indeed, the conclusions to this book have important implications for the democratic selection of leadership for the presidential office.

This book does not delve directly into the normative debate about the relative merits of plebiscitary versus party-control democracy. The sole position taken in this book is that both the input of party voters and that of party insiders are important during the nomination process to fulfill the party's ultimate goal of winning the presidency and implementing the party's policies. In other words, all three sectors of the political party (i.e., voters, organizational leaders, and elected officials) should be seen as having a stake in the outcome and having a voice in the decision-making process. This pluralistic perspective of presidential nomination politics was summarized years ago by Robert Dahl when he wrote, "[Democracy is] a political system in which all the active and legitimate groups in the population can make themselves heard at some crucial stage in the process of decisions."³

The main objective of this book is to provide a theoretical framework and empirical analysis that contributes to our understanding of how party elites behave in presidential nomination campaigns. The conceptual framework and analyses are designed to accomplish this objective. To be sure, this book will address some of the normative issues in the extant literature. For example, there is much discussion in the literature about the disproportionate influence and con-

sequences of states that schedule their nominating contests earlier in the primary season (i.e., front-loading).⁴ Yet, we know very little about how this trend affects the behavior of party elites. Earlier nomination contests might explain earlier endorsements. If so, frontloading has the potential of compromising the role of party elites as peer reviewers at the national convention.

The Setting: Superdelegates, 2008

Rule changes during the 1970s and 1980s brought an increase in the number of presidential primaries, which severely diminished the role of party leaders and elected officials in the nomination process. As a result, in the early 1980s the Democratic Party attempted to restore a modicum of party leadership control in presidential nominations by creating a special category of unpledged delegates generally known as superdelegates. In essence, they are party elites who have a special seat at the presidential nomination table.

The general idea behind the creation of superdelegates was that they would serve as a quality-control mechanism to prevent unfavorable candidates from winning the party nomination. These aficionados of party nomination politics remained in relative obscurity until the closeness of the 2008 contest between Senator Barack Obama and Senator Hillary Clinton put them in the spotlight. As uncommitted delegates to the Democratic Convention, they had the potential to cast the decisive votes in the close contest between Obama and Clinton thus possibly overturning the will of the people by giving the nomination to the candidate who received fewer popular votes.

The Hunt Commission, the party group charged with the responsibility of making recommendations to the Democratic Party, recommended the creation of unpledged delegates, intending that they wait for the voters in all fifty states and territories to express their preferences for a candidate. Afterward, they were expected to exercise a peer review role at the national convention. As stated in the final report of the Hunt Commission, a peer review role of the process would “subject candidates to scrutiny by those who know them the best.”⁵ But in fact, most of them do not remain uncommitted. Why? One of the objectives of this book is to shed light on this question by examining the behavior of Democratic elites during the 2008 presidential nomination process.

Elite Endorsements: An Event History

Elite endorsements in presidential nomination campaigns can be described as an “event history.” In this book, the term refers to the patterns and occurrences of party elite endorsements (i.e., superdelegate endorsements) during the 2007–08 Democratic nomination campaign. Endorsements are strategic calculations that have both cross-sectional and temporal dimensions. Cross-sectional analysis can provide important insights into why party elites choose to endorse one candidate over the other at a single point in time. The value of this information cannot be discounted and therefore is included in this investigation. However, the static approach to understanding endorsement decision-making has limitations. The politics of endorsements is an inherently dynamic process that involves not only *why* an elite makes an endorsement, but also *when* that endorsement is made.

The impact of key covariates on the probability of transitioning from remaining uncommitted to making an endorsement is of particular theoretical interest. The contention here is that there are a variety of internal and external forces that impact an elite endorsement. Constructing a dynamic model that links the strategic timing of endorsement by superdelegates to these covariates is the primary method for testing the main argument of this book.

There is no consensus among party elites on when they should endorse a candidate. The quotes by Clinton and Obama at the beginning of this chapter illustrate two different viewpoints on how superdelegates ought to behave during the nomination campaign. During that process, the superdelegates themselves espoused their own views concerning candidate endorsements. On the one hand, some superdelegates embrace the view that delaying an endorsement until the national convention is the proper course of action. On the other hand, there are those who disagree, believing that superdelegates should endorse a candidate whenever they feel conditions are favorable for an endorsement. In either case, these endorsements are not random occurrences. They are predictable acts that can be understood through systematic analysis.

The Relevance of Political Context

A second argument in this study focuses on political context. The idea that context can matter has been an important part of political science

research since the 1950s. Robert Huckfeldt succinctly summarized this viewpoint when he stated, "Political behavior must be understood in terms of the actor's relationship to the environment, and the environmental factors that impinge on individual choice."⁶ Focusing on political context and its contextual factors helps promote systematic knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon in question.⁷ The theoretical argument is that the timing of an endorsement may depend on the political context in which the endorsement occurs. Indeed, one of the unique and fascinating attributes of presidential nominations is that political action occurs in different political contexts.

The logic behind the consideration of context is that an analysis of the entire period can mask important information about elites' behavior regarding endorsements. The solution to understanding party elite behavior in presidential nominations lies, at least in part, in greater emphasis being placed on the political environment in which an endorsement is rendered. In this study, *political context* refers to the stage in the presidential selection process in which party elites make their endorsement decision. This approach should provide a more nuanced understanding of decision-making by comparing the correlates of endorsement decisions across the full range of presidential stages.

Contextual effects are not random occurrences. For example, one would expect to find variation in the behavior of elected officials based on the electoral environment. Cohen and associates (2008) contend that party insiders attempt to control presidential nominations by coalescing behind a preferred candidate in the invisible primary.⁸ One tool they use in the invisible primary to influence nomination outcomes is their endorsement of a presidential candidate. Of course, some endorsements may carry more weight than others. Given the visibility of holding public office, the endorsement decisions of elected officials in the invisible primary, especially endorsements by members of Congress and governors, are more likely to be coveted by presidential candidates than endorsements by nonelected officials, all things being equal. If this assumption is valid, then it should follow that elected officials are more likely than nonelected officials to endorse earlier in the invisible primary. Hence, political context lends itself to generalizations about which party elites may attempt to control the nomination process via their endorsement decisions.

As is the case with the entire period, each stage has both cross-sectional and temporal dimensions. Furthermore, the same internal and external forces that are used to explain the timing of an endorsement over the entire nomination period may be interpreted quite differently

from stage to stage. This is because endorsement decisions by party elites are strategic calculations that are made at various points in the presidential nomination process. One would expect to find that the impact of a covariate on the timing of an endorsement most likely will change from one nomination stage to another. For example, if elected officials make earlier endorsements in the invisible primary, then the impact of that timing should decline somewhat in the course of the primary season.

It is important to note that attention to political context is not meant to subvert the significance of the entire event history of elite endorsements in a presidential nomination campaign. Instead, the goal is to understand the multiple ways in which an understanding of the political environment buttresses an understanding of electoral behavior.

The Candidates: Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton

Most presidential nomination campaigns initially attract a number of highly qualified candidates. The 2008 Democratic nomination was no exception. A multitude of candidates entered the race. The field of serious contenders included ten current and former state and federal elected officials (see Table 4.1). Going into the 2007 calendar year, polls proclaimed U.S. Senator Hillary Clinton as the presumptive front-runner for the Democratic nomination. With high name recognition and strong connections with party leaders based in large part on her husband Bill Clinton's presidency and her status as a United States senator, there was little doubt that she was a strong contender for the party's nomination.

The second major contender, Barack Obama (D-IL.), was considered a neophyte on the national political scene before he gave the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention and before he was elected to the United States Senate later that year. Prior to Obama's election to the United States Senate, he was a state senator and community organizer from Chicago, Illinois. Still, polls taken throughout 2007 showed he was a strong candidate for the party nomination.⁹ He proved to be adept at both campaign fundraising and building a campaign organization with a base of workers in many states. His effective use of the Internet to locate volunteer staff, recruit activists from communities, and raise campaign funds, may well set the

standard for candidates competing in future presidential campaigns.¹⁰

There were other notable contenders for the party nomination. At the top of the list was former United States senator John Edwards (D-NC) who had sought the Democratic nomination in 2004. Although considered a strong candidate, Edwards was unable to generate much support from the party establishment as the campaign progressed. According to one source, by the end of the 2007 calendar year, Edwards had accumulated only seventeen publicly announced superdelegate endorsements compared to ninety-six for Clinton and forty-four for Obama.¹¹ Failing to gain the support necessary to sustain a lengthy campaign, Edwards dropped his bid for the nomination on January 30, 2008. The other notable candidates in the race were United States Senator Joe Biden (D-DE) and Governor Bill Richardson (D-NM). But they were unable to attract the money and support necessary to run a competitive race. They therefore aborted their bids for the party nomination before or immediately after the primary season began.¹² The campaign for superdelegate endorsements soon became a contest between two candidates, Obama and Clinton. The investigation of elite endorsements in this book is therefore based on the contest between these two candidates.¹³

Much can be learned about the dynamics of nomination politics by analyzing the two-candidate race between Obama and Clinton in 2008. By all accounts, the 2008 nomination contest was a watershed event in American politics. From the standpoint of identity politics (i.e., the self-interest and perspectives of social minorities), 2008 has no equal in the annals of American history. For the first time in the nation's history, an African-American male and a white female were the major contenders for the party's nomination. This momentous occurrence will likely open the gate for other viable minority and female candidates to run for the presidency with a realistic chance of winning in the future. Hence, the 2008 Democratic presidential primary provides an excellent opportunity for studying the relationship between identity politics and elite endorsements and its ramifications for future presidential elections. Another example is the opportunity for study presented by the frontloading of presidential primaries and caucuses by many states mentioned above. Although the frontloading of state nominating contests had been an issue for years, the problem became especially acute in 2008 when the first events were held in early January. Do institutional rules have implications for elite behavior? This study hopes to provide an answer to this question.

Indeed, the Democratic contest in 2008 was a consequential one on many dimensions. As a result, the nomination contest is worthy of empirical scrutiny to increase our understanding of presidential nomination politics.

Superdelegate Endorsements

In 2008, unpledged delegates to the Democratic National Convention were allowed to vote their consciences and switch their endorsements from one candidate to another at any time during the nomination process. Furthermore, they could remain uncommitted, as recommended by the Hunt Commission when it first created the special cohort of delegates for the 1984 presidential nomination.

In reality, few party elites have changed their endorsement position over the course of the nomination process. In 2008, only a small number of unpledged delegates switched their initial announced endorsements (mostly Clinton supporters) from one candidate to another before Obama became the presumptive party nominee in early June. A few members switched to place their endorsements in sync with their constituents' preference.¹⁴ But most of the switching occurred around the time Obama became the presumptive nominee in early June 2008, a pattern of behavior best described as "inevitability."¹⁵ That is, by early June there was a general agreement among political pundits that Obama was destined to win the party's nomination. As a result, a relatively large number of Clinton's superdelegates switched sides in an effort to solidify party support for Obama before going into the general election.

Although the question of why party elites switch their endorsements is an interesting one that deserves scholarly attention, it is not the focus of this investigation.¹⁶ The primary objective of this research is to use the original endorsement decisions of unpledged delegates to better understand why party elites endorse a candidate for the party nomination and when they do it. All things being equal, the argument here is that the initial publicly announced endorsement is more likely to be a sincere expression of an endorser's candidate preference than the changed endorsement. An examination of the timing of an original endorsement by a superdelegate can provide valuable insights concerning the dynamic process of the behavior of party elites during the presidential nomination campaigns.

Conceptual Framework

When do party elites decide to weigh in on their party's presidential nomination? Why do they endorse a particular candidate during the nomination campaign? To answer these questions, a conceptual framework for understanding elite behavior in presidential nominations is provided. The main argument is that the survival time (and endorsement choice) of Democratic elites is determined by a variety of internal and external factors.

Internal influences refer to the goals, role perceptions, and motivational levels that stimulate individual behavior. The argument based on this perspective is that a model of rational behavior structures our understanding of elite behavior. Before making a decision, a political actor weighs the perceived costs and benefits of the decision and considers the personal value of different outcomes. In this regard, decision-making is instrumental and strategic for the individual. The decision that is ultimately reached through introspective evaluation can of course mean the difference between reward and punishment later in the decision-maker's political career.

In the context of this research, the values, goals, role perceptions, and motivations of a superdelegate can be a powerful stimulus for an endorsement decision. Thus, internal forces are categorized as member characteristics. For example, as members of historically disadvantaged groups, the timing and endorsement choice of a candidate by African American and female superdelegates may be guided by their perceptions of the treatment of racial minorities and women in American society. In this regard, a sense of group identity might be the basis for an endorsement decision. Elected officials may be motivated by the goal of reelection and nonelected superdelegates by desire for a higher position in the party's organizational hierarchy. Regardless of the goal sought, political decisions are invariably purposeful. They are made to achieve a desired outcome.

Beyond personal values, goals, role perceptions, and motivations, external forces can also affect the duration time and choice of an elite endorsement. Party elites, in fact, respond to a variety of forces external to the individual. The external environment will be divided into three subgroups: demographic factors, campaign context, and institutional setting. The explanatory variables in each of these categories should contribute to our understanding of elite decision-making in presidential nominations.

Figure 1.1 provides a conceptual framework for a dynamic model of party elite endorsements that is based on the entire presidential nomination period, and the electoral context. It is important to note that the model does not refer to a particular presidential election cycle because political circumstances such as competition among candidates will vary from election cycle to election cycle, a factor that can determine the shape of the survival curve. Also, it is important to state that while the focus of this research is on strategic decision-making among Democratic elites, the model can be used to examine elite behavior in any party. At the beginning of each election cycle, the probability of survival for party elites will be equal to 1. In other words, all participants are uncommitted at the very beginning of each cycle. The endorsement process begins when a candidate publicly announces his or her bid for the presidency. As illustrated in the figure, once the nomination period officially begins, the probability of survival begins to decline until the end of the process; thus, the survival function will not increase over time. Eventually, it will equal 0 or near 0, depending on the presence

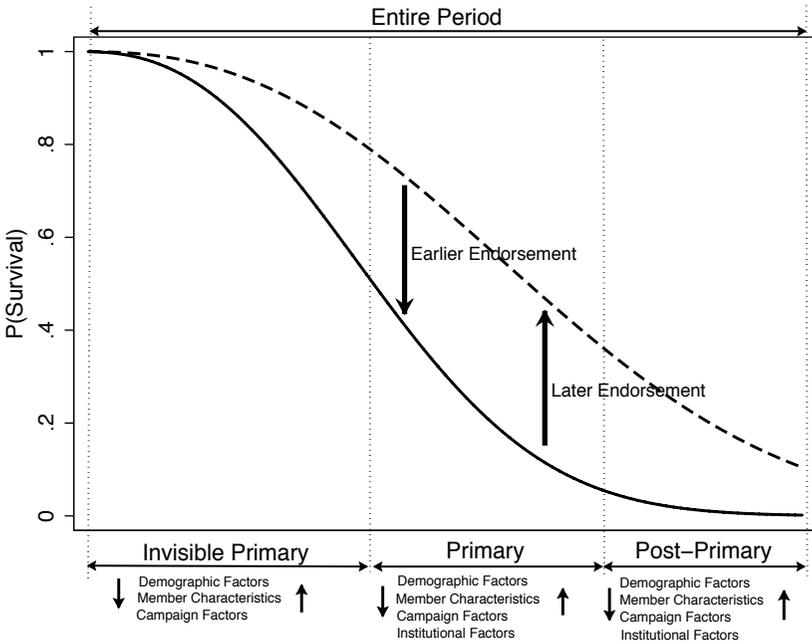


Figure 1.1. Conceptual Framework for Determinants of Time-to-Endorsement by Party Elites.

of censored observations. The figure also shows that the survival rate is affected by a variety of external and internal forces during the nomination process. Regardless of the election year, these exogenous and endogenous forces will be at work affecting the decision to endorse earlier or later in an electoral stage, or the entire event history.

Methodology

In addition to descriptive statistics and the construction of logit models to understand the correlates of endorsement choice, this project models the time-to-endorsement of superdelegates using a parametric survival analysis. Parametric models assume a continuous parametric distribution for the probability of failure over time.

A general parametric survival model takes as its starting point the hazard:¹⁷

$$h(t) = \frac{f(t)}{S(t)} \quad h(t) = \frac{f(t)}{S(t)}. \quad (1)$$

where the density $f(t)$ is the probability that the duration observed is equal to some particular value t , or the instantaneous probability of the event (failure) occurring, that is,

$$f(t) = \Pr(T_i = t). \quad (2)$$

Furthermore, the survival function is defined by 1 minus the CDF (cumulative density function) meaning the probability of event (failure) on or before time t , and it is often generically termed $F(t)$ of the density, that is,

$$S(t) = 1 - F(t) = 1 - \Pr(T_i \leq t) = \Pr(T_i \geq t). \quad (3)$$

Therefore, the practical meaning of the survival function $S(t)$ is the *probability of survival to t* . In the context of this study, this means the probability of remaining uncommitted to time t (i.e., a given week in the presidential nomination process). From the relationship between the probability density function and survival function in (1), their definitions in (2) and (3), and the rule for conditional probability, we know that the hazard, $h(t) = \Pr(T_i = t \mid T_i \geq t)$, is the conditional

probability of the event occurring (i.e., an endorsement) at time t , given that superdelegates have remained uncommitted up to time t . Thinking of the hazard as a probability, it is important to note that this variable is inversely related to duration—that is, higher hazards correspond to shorter durations, and vice versa.

For a set of observations indexed by i , a brief discussion on uncensored and censored observations is in order. Uncensored observations ($C_i = 1$) tell us about both the hazard of the event, and the survival of individuals prior to that event. In other words, they tell us the exact time of failure, that is, they contribute to their *density*. In contrast, censored observations ($C_i = 0$) tell us only that those observations have survived at least to time T_i . This means that they contribute information through their *survival* function. Combining these into a general parametric likelihood for survival models yields:

$$L = \prod_{i=1}^N [f(T_i)]^{C_i} [S(T_i)]^{1-C_i} \quad (4)$$

with the corresponding log-likelihood:

$$\ln L = \sum_{i=1}^N \{C_i \ln[f(T_i)] + (1 - C_i) \ln[S(T_i)]\}. \quad (5)$$

which can be maximized using standard methods. To include covariates, we simply condition the terms of the likelihood on data matrix X and the associated parameter vector β , that is:

$$\ln L = \sum_{i=1}^N \{C_i \ln[f(T_i|X, \beta)] + (1 - C_i) \ln[S(T_i|X, \beta)]\}. \quad (6)$$

Distribution-based parametric models, such as exponential or Weibull models, are very widely used in the social sciences. The Weibull parameterization is generally preferred due to its flexibility of the hazard rate relative to the exponential model. The Weibull Model is the parametric event history model used in this investigation. The Weibull model is a hazard rate model in which the hazard is $h(t) = \lambda p(\lambda t)^{(p-1)} h(t) = \lambda p(\lambda t)^{(p-1)}$, where λ is a positive scale parameter and p is a shape parameter that defines the shape of the Weibull distribution. When $p = 1$ it corresponds to an exponential model (thus, the Weibull nests the exponential model), $p > 1$ means that the hazard is rising monotonically over time, and $0 < p < 1$ means the hazard is decreasing monotonically over time.

Another reason the parametric model is employed in the analysis is that the nature of the dataset consists of heavily tied data—

as discussed later, the time-to-endorsement is measured weekly and thus, there are many observations (i.e., superdelegates) endorsing at the same week (see, for example, Figure 6.1). Even though the Cox semiparametric model is also widely used by social scientists in general and by political scientists in particular, the Cox model could be problematic for this research due to tied data. In general, the effect of ties in the Cox model is generally to bias the coefficient estimates toward zero, to the extent that there is a more-or-less monotonic function of the number of tied observations in the data. A rule of thumb is that if more than 10% of the observations are tied, then tied data may be problematic for the analysis, which is the case with the dataset analyzed here.¹⁸

In the hazards framework, the hazard ratio for two observations with different values i and j on a covariate vector X is $HR_{i/j} = \exp(X_i \hat{\beta}) / \exp(X_j \hat{\beta})$. The hazard ratio reduces to $\exp(\hat{\beta})$ when it comes to the case that the hazard ratio for two observations differs on only one dichotomous variable. In general, parameter estimates, $\hat{\beta}$ s, reflect the impact of the covariate in question on the hazard; thus, positive values indicate that higher values of the variable correspond to higher hazards of the event and to shorter expected time-to-event and vice versa. Specifically, HR s reflect the relative/proportional change in hazards, $h(t)$, associated with a unit change in X_k . In other words, they are invariant to the values of the other covariates. Similarly, remember that $100 \times (HR - 1)$ is the same thing as the percentage change in the hazard associated with a one-unit change in the covariate in question.

Data Source and Collection

Given the importance of party elite endorsements in presidential nominations, one would expect to find a dataset with a comprehensive list of superdelegates, their endorsement decision, and the date of the publicly announced endorsement. Unfortunately, there is no private organization or government agency that collects this data. The information must be obtained from a variety of sources such as national and local newspapers, the candidates' Web sites, and blogs on the Internet that track the endorsement decisions of Democratic elites.

In this investigation, the main source for data collection is Democratic Convention Watch (DCW), a blog that has been following convention news since November 2005.¹⁹ Beginning in January 2008, DCW kept a running tally of superdelegates who had endorsed Obama

or Clinton. Unlike media organizations that sporadically updated their lists of endorsers, the DCW updated its endorsement list daily during the 2008 primary and post-primary seasons. Moreover, the Web site often documented its source of information from press releases, which was important for verifying the authenticity of information regarding endorsement choice and endorsement date. The data and documentation provided by this organization have greatly assisted researchers in their investigations of party elite behavior in presidential nominations.²⁰

The Web site also included some of the names and dates of superdelegates' endorsements before the primary season began. According to the DCW Web site, seventy-two endorsements were made before the first presidential nomination contest on January 3, 2008. The DCW's primary source of information for pre-primary endorsements came from the Web sites of the candidates Obama and Clinton.²¹ However, the list was not inclusive. More than two hundred original endorsement decisions (mostly in Clinton's favor) were rendered during the pre-primary season.

To complete the endorsement list, a variety of Internet and media sources were examined, including the blog Daily Kos, *The New York Times*, CNN, CBS, and the Associated Press (*The Wall Street Journal's* main source for delegate counts). In some cases, the DCW list was supplemented by searching local media sources (e.g., newspapers) to find information on the date of an endorsement. The list published by Daily Kos was especially helpful because it provided the names of superdelegates who publicly announced an endorsement for Obama or Clinton during the invisible primary period.²² Knowing the names of the endorsers was helpful in narrowing the search for the date of the endorsement.

Multiple public sources were used (e.g., local, state, and national newspapers) to acquire additional information about the date of the endorsement as well. However, in some cases, the actual date of the original endorsement decision could not be determined. To resolve this methodological issue, two coders, the author and a research assistant, independently recorded the date of the endorsement after searching individually for the information. These two coders were able to agree on the period (i.e., week) of the endorsement, but not the actual date in every case. The inability to determine the exact date of the endorsement led the author to code the data in terms of the number of weeks instead of the number of days.

As for the dataset, the total possible N for the project is 852 superdelegates. From this pool, nine subjects were dropped from the

analysis, thus lowering the number to 843 unpledged delegates.²³ The invisible primary period (first week through first half of fiftieth week, corresponding to January 21, 2007, through January 2, 2008) included 772 unpledged delegates. Some members acquired the title of superdelegate after the invisible primary season, which is why the total number of unpledged delegates in the analysis is higher than the number of unpledged delegates during the invisible primary season. In other words, the time-of-entry is not the same for all individuals. During the pre-primary period, there were 204 failures or endorsements and 568 survivors or nonendorsements. Hence, many superdelegates adopted a wait-and-see approach during the nomination period, which seems to contradict the party centric argument. During the primary season (second half of fiftieth week through seventy-third week, corresponding with January 3, 2008, through June 14, 2008), 60 unpledged delegates, called “add-on” delegates, were added to the roster at different dates during the season therefore bringing the total number of cases in the period to 628 superdelegates. Of these 628 party members, there were 569 failures and 59 survivors. For the post-primary season (seventy-fourth week through eighty-fourth week equating to June 15 through August 23), 19 individuals joined the delegation bringing the total to 78 party elites during the period. The post-primary period resulted in seven failures and 71 survivors. In total, the event (i.e., an endorsement) did not occur for 71 members of the cohort. Hence, one can state that many superdelegates did not wait until the convention to exercise their peer review role as envisioned by the Hunt Commission (see chapters 2 and 3). Put differently, approximately 8 percent of the delegation during the 2007–08 presidential nomination campaign did not make the transition from remaining uncommitted to making an endorsement by the beginning of the eighty-fourth week. For each individual, the clock begins ticking when he or she is bestowed the title of superdelegate, which can occur at any time during the nomination process. This means that some unpledged delegates will have a shorter duration time than others. In this investigation, the duration time for superdelegates ranges from a low of eleven weeks to a high of eighty-four weeks. Members who survived (i.e., remained uncommitted) the entire period have a duration time of eighty-four weeks.

Key Terms

Superdelegate is an informal term commonly used to describe unpledged party leaders and elected officials who automatically get a

delegate slot at the Democratic National Convention. In other words, they obtain their seats at the national convention by being current or former local, state, and national party leaders and elected officials. A detailed discussion of these delegates is presented in chapter 3. On occasion, the terms *party insiders*, *party leaders*, *uncommitted delegates*, and *unpledged delegates* will be used in a given sentence in lieu of the term *superdelegate*.

For purpose of this study, the term *party elite* has a special meaning. In general, there are two main categories of superdelegates in the nomination process, party activists and party insiders. As R. Lawrence Butler notes, each has its own motivations and goals. Whereas party activists tend to be more concerned about the nominee's issue positions, party insiders are more likely to be concerned about the electability of the nominee in the upcoming general election.²⁴ Most of the superdelegates are party insiders, that is, elected officials and members of the Democratic National Committee. They are the power elites of party politics. The term is meant to convey the broader purpose of this book, that is, to better understand the role of party elites in presidential nominations from a power perspective. Party elites have been the power brokers of presidential nomination politics for most of the nation's history.²⁵ Do they remain the power brokers of nomination politics even though the rules of the game have changed to increase the influence of voters? This book is designed to provide some answer to this question.

It is doubtful that any future party reforms will wrest power completely away from party elites. In the future, elites will continue to endorse party candidates as they did two centuries ago. Furthermore, endorsements will most likely continue to shape the outcome of presidential nominations. Superdelegates, by definition, are party elites. On the one hand, superdelegates are a byproduct of contemporary nomination politics; on the other hand, party elites are a permanent feature of American politics. A central claim of this study is that superdelegates provide an excellent venue for studying the behavior of party elites. For this reason, the latter term is the principal focus of this book.

Plan of the Book

This book is divided into three parts. The first part provides a historical overview of party elites in presidential nominations. The next

chapter briefly discusses the role of party elites from the time of the United States Constitution to the time of those reforms within the Democratic Party that led to the creation of superdelegates. The third chapter presents an overview and discussion of the superdelegate controversy in 2008. This chapter also sets the stage for an examination of the timing and choice of elite endorsements in the 2008 Democratic nomination contest according to two political contexts. These are: (1) the invisible primary, and (2) the presidential primary (and caucus) season.

The second part of the book presents the statistical analysis of superdelegate endorsements according to political context. The invisible primary and presidential primary chapters (chapters 4 and 5 respectively) include discussions of theory, hypotheses, model construction, and findings. An analysis of the post-primary season is excluded because very few endorsements were made. In the book's third part, an analysis of the dynamic process of elite endorsements over the entire period will be presented (chapter 6). The chapter also presents an examination of why some party elites stayed uncommitted in the 2008 Democratic nomination contest between the candidates Obama and Clinton.