

## Chapter 1

# Making Parties into Machines

If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all.<sup>1</sup>

—Thomas Jefferson

### The Tale of Eric Cantor

One of the informal prerequisites for a potential member of party leadership in the US Congress today is representing a safe district. Modern-day legislative leaders spend much of their time not only on the internal management of their chamber but traveling the country fundraising and supporting fellow partisans seeking election to the US Congress. Only three times in US history has a sitting Speaker of the House been defeated in reelection. Party members and other leaders want to know that their party's leadership will be stable, so safe-district candidates are inherently more appealing than swing-district candidates. The Majority Leader, often the Speaker's closest ally, needs a similar level of electoral safety to do their job effectively. Thus, Eric Cantor's defeat in 2014 sent political shockwaves and provided an example of the unique challenges presented by the American system of direct primary elections.

Most elections to the US Congress are quite stable. District composition and boundaries, partisanship, and incumbency provide significant protections for those already in office. Once in, candidates are difficult to remove from office through the ballot box. The defeat of an incumbent is rare in any circumstances, but particularly in a primary election. Cantor, a Republican who had represented a strongly Republican district in central

Virginia since 2001, appeared to have only token primary opposition from Randolph-Macon College economics professor David Brat. However, Brat defeated Cantor in a shocking primary upset.

Cantor ascended to the role of House Majority Leader in 2011, when Republicans wrested majority control of the chamber from Democrats. In his safe district, Cantor would be able to spend less time taking care of his district and expend more effort campaigning for fellow Republicans. Brat, a member of the surging Tea Party fiscal conservative movement, decided to mount a primary challenge to Cantor for the 2014 cycle.

Like most primary challengers against incumbents, Brat's campaign was a tiny operation, especially when compared with the might a multi-term incumbent and party leader like Cantor had available. Cantor spent \$5 million on the campaign; Brat, less than \$200,000.<sup>2</sup> Brat accepted no donations from political action committees.<sup>3</sup> Leveraging media stars of the Tea Party movement like radio host Mark Levin, Brat's campaign portrayed Cantor as focused on crony relationships with major corporations to the detriment of small businesses in the district. Brat also embraced a populist message that would hallmark Donald Trump's presidential campaign two years later, emphasizing a hard line on illegal immigration and opposition to government bailouts.

In almost any campaign season Brat should have had no chance at victory. Spending little money, having a small professional staff, and facing off against an entrenched incumbent are all warning signs of an unsuccessful candidacy. But Brat played on feelings of disconnect between constituents and Cantor, defeated the Majority Leader, and went on to easily beat the Democratic nominee in the general election.

Another aspect of Brat's unlikely victory was its occurrence not during a general election contest, but in a primary. Incumbent legislators lose their reelection bids in general elections less than 10 percent of the time, but the loss percentage in primaries is even a fraction of that, at around one-hundredth of one percent. If primaries are that uncompetitive, what exact purpose do they serve in a functioning democracy? Unlike the parties themselves, the vast majority of politics conduct their elections without primary elections. The direct primary is a peculiarly American invention that few other nations have adopted, and with more than a century of electoral history behind them, primaries give us a test bed to understand parties and their role in a democracy better. In this book, we seek to provide more of that understanding of primaries.

Primaries are important because of their significant power over one of the basic functions of a political party: the nomination of candidates to represent that party in a general election. All parties nominate candidates, and most allow the parties to do so without input or interference from the voting public. Parties choose the candidates they believe best represent their ideologies and vision, and let the public choose which of those party nominees best serves the office. A David Brat would not be able to wrest his party's nomination from an entrenched party leader like Eric Cantor without the presence of direct primary elections.

Cantor's defeat at Brat's hands is emblematic of the substantive shift in politics brought about since the advent of the direct primary election in the early 1900s. Unlike almost every other country in the world, the US puts the power of partisan candidate nominations in the hands of voters rather than party leadership. As such, primaries shape elections by altering the relationship between voters and their party. In particular, by stripping party leadership of their ability to control the party's message through its candidates, the direct primary has weakened the parties' ability to link a disconnected and disinterested public with the political process. Many of the ills of modern-day politics can be traced back to the advent and evolution of the direct primary. And these ills are not just because a party leader can be defeated. They are wider than that and go the heart of what it means to have a well-functioning representative democracy.

What is at stake here is an understanding of how parties function in such a democracy. They are not simply a neutral calculating institution that passively records votes to determine a nominee. At least they have not done so historically. Parties have, as Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt remind us in *How Democracies Die*, functioned as gatekeepers who "screen out those who pose a threat to democracy or are otherwise unfit to hold office."<sup>4</sup> The rise of primaries and the embrace of direct democracy has weakened that essential function. These ills have been present for some time; however, they have become even more apparent in recent years.

Of course, one of the appeals of primaries is to create a greater sense of democracy and to foster a sense of equality between people. Parties should be, to the champions of primaries, the tool of fully equal citizens. On the surface, we all have an equal vote and apparently equal influence over the outcome. The seemingly oligarchic nature of parties means that, to their critics, they undermine democratic ideas and mock the notion that we are all equal citizens. However, this is far too simplistic—everyone realizes that

we are not truly equal in influence concerning the outcome of primaries. Furthermore, as James Lindley Wilson argues in *Democratic Equality*, the ideal of equality “requires a richer conception of deliberative fairness.”<sup>5</sup> To make democracy work and to ensure true equality it takes more than imposing rigid procedural structures, such as primaries, to create an illusion of equality. While it is certainly correct, for those committed to democracy, to view inequality with suspicion, the best response to inequality requires nuance, and forms of inequality can, in the long run, enhance democratic decision-making on the part of citizens. As Wilson aptly writes, “Political equality requires the maintenance of equal rule over time, rather than merely sharing in rule at individual moments, such as election day.”<sup>6</sup> It is our contention that a more prominent role for parties in the nomination process is only unfair in a superficial reading of politics. Rightly imagined, stronger political parties will provide an enhanced process that is more fair overtime.

To put our cards on the table, we believe not only that parties are essential to democracy—that is a common belief of many political scientists going back decades—but that rightly functioning parties are central to democracy. Rightly functioning parties are not completely democratic in nature and include a strong role for an educated elite not beholden to every impulse of the voter.

### What Is Democracy?

To better grasp what we are calling for, it is necessary to review what we mean by “democracy.” A reasonable place to start is the word *democracy* itself, which can be traced to its Greek roots—*demos* meaning “people” and *kratia* meaning “rule.” Thus, it simply means the people rule. But who are the people and how do they rule? Aristotle argued, “the virtue of a citizen is held to be that capacity to rule and be ruled finely.”<sup>7</sup> That issue, complicated enough in a Greek city-state, becomes even more vexing in a large, diversely populated nation. Somehow the views of the ruler and the views of the average citizen must be aligned. For the ancient democrats, that meant drawing lots to fill that many offices—thus anyone had an equal chance at office (and, thus, not just the “unfairly” popular would hold office). On many issues the citizens themselves decided on policy. This was the essence of democracy to the ancient Greeks and what is commonly termed *direct democracy* today. However, this was, through the ages, criticized for a host

of reasons, not least of which was that the average citizen might not have the intelligence or dispassion to administer a government. This challenge about how to make democracy work was the issue the United States took up from its very beginning.

Of course, *democracy* has been defined in a number of ways.<sup>8</sup> As noted, the ancient Greeks defined it in ways that are much more participatory than we think of it today. We might suggest three ways of looking at democracy.

On one end there is a democracy that we could call deliberative. James Lindley Wilson writes that “political deliberation involves the formation, through individual reflection and interpersonal interaction, of judgments about what the regime ought to do.”<sup>9</sup> This deliberative ideal was most clearly captured by the ancient Greeks, who met collectively to discuss policy and make decisions by consensus.<sup>10</sup> People were highly attuned to politics, and decision-making was as close as possible to being collective. Man was, to use Aristotle’s terms, a political animal. Citizens partook in debate and discussion about what a society should do. This kind of democracy requires a small community. And for it to be truly effective it is probably a requirement that people know and trust each other—they are friends in some sense, or at most distant, neighbors. In the United States, something similar is captured in the New England town hall meetings. Present-day caucuses during the nomination process can also, at times, reach toward the deliberative ideal. People must make arguments about what we should do, what is important, and what policies to adopt. Of course, establishing and developing such a system is going to take a lot of time. It is the kingdom of the political animal, a kind of democracy for the highly politically engaged.

At the other end of the spectrum is representative democracy. As the word *representative* implies in this system, people choose their leaders. Of course, elections can make these leaders accountable. But there is no way to force people to think and talk about politics. They can do that; however, no one is required to do so as a prerequisite to political participation. Indeed, in this ideal, sometimes advocates really desire that people reflect on what they believe in and what they want done. Then, silently and without pressure, they go to the voting place and cast their ballots. In fact, as we do today, candidates and their surrogates are not supposed to conduct any politicking close to the polling station, and one’s vote is secret. This kind of democracy has its defenders because of its practicality and the way it is well adapted to a large polity. However, it might actually create barriers between the government and citizenry. As Robert Dahl observed,

these institutions of representative democracy removed government so far from the direct reach of the demos that one could reasonably wonder, as some critics have, whether the new system was entitled to call itself by the venerable name of democracy.<sup>11</sup>

To many of its defenders, such as James Madison, this removal of government from “the direct reach of the demos” was precisely its most appealing aspect. Yet, as the direct democratic impulse grew stronger in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this became a problem to overcome.

The United States was becoming a bold experiment in finding ways to give people more of a voice in government. Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, in *Democracy for Realists*, argue that there is a “folk theory” of democracy that values ordinary people’s preferences as paramount:

In the convention view, democracy begins with the voters. Ordinary people have preferences about that their government should do. They choose leaders who will do those things, or they enact their preferences directly in referendums. . . . Democracy makes the people the rulers, and legitimacy derives from consent. In Abraham Lincoln’s stirring words from the Gettysburg Address, democratic government is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” That way of thinking about democracy has passed into everyday wisdom, not just in the United States but in a great many other countries around the globe. It constitutes a kind of “folk theory” of democracy.<sup>12</sup>

Could the nation find a middle ground between Madisonian vision of a partyless representative democracy and the very problematic ancient ideal of deliberative and highly participatory democracy? Progressives came to believe that middle way was in what we might call *direct democracy*. This upset the sense of balance created by the founders and, later, modified and augmented by the creators of the major political parties. In Achen and Bartels’s telling, “The direct primary represented an unprecedented attempt to impose the folk theory of democracy on the nominating process.”<sup>13</sup> Citizens would have more avenues to influence politics—more than Madison could have imagined. At the same time, they would not meet and set policy as Athenian citizens might. Citizens in isolation, unable to truly collectively deliberate as the ancient ideal of democracy demanded, were instead given power to select candidates for office in the rather naive belief that collective

folk wisdom would simply spring forth. Thus, the Progressives did not just support primaries, but also urged the adoption of initiative, referendum, and recall. Theodore Roosevelt supported all these reforms and expanded them with a desire to make it easier to amend the Constitution itself.<sup>14</sup> There has been, for well over 100 years, an impulse to expand democracy into areas in which it did not hither thereto exist.

The political theorist Robert Talisse is one of many who worry about “overdoing democracy”—the title of his recent book. Talisse is concerned with the way “politics is being overdone” and how it is detrimental to democracy.<sup>15</sup> His concern is not about the internal workings of parties, and he may very well disagree with the ideas presented here. But his thesis is valuable to the argument of this book. The expansion of democracy, its very tyrannizing quality, has become a problem and accentuates some of the worst tendencies of our politics. We don’t suggest that technological innovations, or the media, the rise of money in politics, or changing economic conditions are unimportant in explaining how our politics have reached the state they are in. However, we do believe that the politically polarized world we live in today, in part, reflects structural changes in our political parties that long predate many of the causes often suggested. And the most important structural transformation is the way the political parties went about selecting candidates for office. The impulse for democracy led to the rise of the direct primaries, and that led, in the long run, to weaker political parties and the unhealthy political world we live in today.

### The Direct Primary in America

The direct primary is a nearly unique American political invention and practice.<sup>16</sup> Most states have featured sub-presidential direct primaries for a century, and direct, binding presidential primaries have been in effect since the 1970s. Primaries are controversial, not only because of their near-exclusivity in the United States’ political milieu but also because of the effects they have on political party organizations, electoral systems, governing, and even the electorates themselves. This controversy stems from a fundamental political science question concerning the role of citizens in the political process. While democratic theory called for citizen participation in the electoral process, where and when this occurs is open to debate. The direct democratic impulse drove the adoption of the primaries, and we can think of primaries as efforts to advance direct democratic practices into the US’s historically

republican system. In short, how much direct democracy is a good thing?

Primary elections are ubiquitous in American politics today. In a political environment dominated by two major political parties, some believe that primaries give voters an expanded set of choices, often ideological, among the often many primary candidates, where a general-only election would limit them to two effective nominees. Others see the primary election as increasing polarization in the electorate, higher campaign costs, and polarization in government.<sup>17</sup>

The direct primary was a product of the Progressive Era, and its origins at that time tell us much about their effect on American politics. The strongly anti-partisan Progressives wanted to curtail party politicking and governing as much as possible, mostly due to the excesses of urban machines. To achieve this, the Progressives wanted to boost direct democratic impulses among the electorate. The historical record shows the direct primary achieves neither of these goals. Yet, though the primaries did not achieve these goals, they were a product of Progressive thinking, even when Progressives as a group held mixed views about them.

While it is true that the creation of the first primaries predated the Progressives and not all Progressives favored the primaries, many Progressives were quite enthusiastic about them. Progressive ideas about direct democracy easily found expression in the primary. Furthermore, Progressives and their political descendants were the ones who either pushed for the adoption of primaries or, in the 1970s, created the conditions in which primaries flourished.

The Progressive Movement, shaping political currents that had existed for a long time in American history, helped foster a certain notion of direct democracy that was appealing to many. It was hard to argue against respecting the will of the people, and primaries seem to do just that. While some Progressives, such as Herbert Croly, saw problems with the direct primary, it is hard to stop a mechanism that appears to be democratic. It was also the case that even people who were not Progressive were influenced by these ideals. Thus, non-Progressives could reflect and embrace these reforms for any number of reasons. Embracing the language of democracy is bound to unleash further demands for giving more people more voice in the system.<sup>18</sup> This made direct primaries, if not exactly inevitable, probable.

The push for more direct democracy is where we find the great challenge presented by primary elections. Progressives may have conflated frustration with the existing machine parties with a desire for less republican democracy and thus advocated for more direct reforms. In that way, the primaries were

the wrong solution to the problem. The main effect that direct primaries have had is a weakening of the parties as a linkage institution between the public and their government.

In this book, we will develop a theory of the direct primary as a flawed initiative for direct democracy, and trace the challenges presented by the direct primary through the lens of representative versus direct democracy.

## The Accidental Nature of Parties

Any exploration of the role of political parties in American politics must account for the tension between their integral position in representative democracy and the intense distaste for their very existence. That stress between two forces—the impetus toward a direct democracy that seeks to limit the role of parties and the vitality of parties as central linkage institutions—marks the history of American political parties and informs the development of the direct primary election.

Primaries are an important part of the political process because of how they affect the key linkage institution between a public and its politics: the parties themselves. The effect of primaries on the general public is indirect, because their most significant impact is on the parties. Understanding primaries thus means understanding parties, which itself is a large task.

Parties are ubiquitous in politics, but their genesis was accidental. Despite the great care that the Constitution put into governmental design, parties were not part of it. Particularly in the US, parties are both essential to political participation and extraconstitutional, which puts them in a precarious position, fraught with contradictions: parties are robust, yet constantly under threat; emic to politics, yet popular sentiment often tends toward their abolition; powerful, yet susceptible to outside forces.

Thus, primaries are an important area of study because of the impact they have had on this key political institution. Parties are widespread in their effect because of their connection with every element of politics. Parties connect, perhaps better than any other institution, the citizenry to both the elective and governmental processes. Certainly, parties are the most effective linkage institution in politics.

Parties are nebulous because of their lack of constitutional definition and their scope. There is no baseline against which to measure party activity in the Constitution as there is, say, executive power. Parties are generally free to do what they want. But parties also have shifting centers of power

because of their *sui generis* creation. There are no rules in the Constitution restraining political parties. As we will see, over time that led to parties accumulating an incredible amount of power, which led to a regulatory backlash. The same parties that had built themselves into all-powerful local machines would become gutted by external rules, most especially the direct primary.

The American political party is unique in the world in being in such a position. Most other nations have some form of partisan acknowledgment built into their constitutions, though those descriptions can be seen as other nations founded after the United States learning from our mistakes. The parties' roles in American government and politics are informal, extraconstitutional, and fluid.

Parties, if they existed at all, were supposed to be ephemeral but instead have paradoxically persisted for two centuries and more. We can thus see parties as robust institutions due to their longevity but also weak ones due to their susceptibility to etic influences. This unique situation makes parties excellent areas for study but difficult organizations about which to draw stable conclusions. Parties are a free-floating anomaly within the American political milieu.

That does not mean that parties are purely nebulous entities, however. Parties are important elements in any polity, hence why so many other countries have accounted for them in their basic governing documents. Post-World War II Europe featured many of its nations specifically granting status to political parties in their constitutions: Italy, France, and Germany all noted parties as having a recognized and official role in elections and governance. Political parties are ubiquitous in democracies for a number of reasons, but the most significant one is that they provide a connection between the electorate and their elected officials that is unsurpassed by any other entity.

While a debate has continued since Ancient Greece over whether or not people are naturally inclined toward political activity, one consistent truth has been that when the public have had robust political party connections, they have also had strong participatory relationships with their governments. An incontrovertible truth is that parties create a vital linkage between the public and government. Laws and exogenous shocks that weaken political parties also tend to weaken public participation. As linkage institutions connecting people to government, parties are unrivaled. So those activities and occurrences that, intentionally or not, strain the linkage relationship that parties foster are worthy of understanding. Weakened political parties subsequently weaken citizen political engagement.

There are many ways to look at political parties: some as rational creations of office-seekers,<sup>19</sup> some as natural outgrowths of social movements,<sup>20</sup> and others as electioneering entities.<sup>21</sup> All of these views are valid and reflective of the multifaceted nature of parties. Mostly within this work we will focus on the party as a linkage institution between the public and its government. Linkage institutions connect people to their government, providing education and mobilization pathways that citizens would otherwise not utilize.

In this book we argue that no exogenous shock has been more damaging to the political parties than the introduction of the direct nominating primary election. The direct primary was originally created as a method to rein in the excesses of urban party machines, but its choice as the mechanism to accomplish this was based on a flawed view of it as a necessary shift toward direct democracy. To explore the flaws in the direct primary, we must be cognizant of three interlinked concepts: 1) political parties as linkage institutions; 2) participatory democracy, where the public is engaged but uses a series of intermediary institutions to facilitate that engagement; and 3) direct democracy, where elected representatives are minimized and the general public has more immediate input into policymaking.

The primary's architects, loosely described as the Progressive Movement of the late 1800s and early 1900s, conflated participatory and direct democracy. However, a century of evidence has shown that direct democracy and participatory democracy are two different things entirely, and the public has not at all embraced the more direct democratic impulses embodied in the nominating primary. As an experiment in direct democracy, as a reform to an admittedly corrupt party system, and as an effort to empower the public, the creation and development of the direct nominating primary has been an overall failure. In this book we will explore how, in intent and design, the direct nominating primary is a flawed political process that has done more damage to parties as linkage institutions than it has bolstered citizen engagement.

## Parties and Democracy

Democracy and political parties are so connected that it is easy to think one does not exist without the other. Through most of the history of democratic governance, parties have existed as a vital entity in each citizen-governed

system. But parties often operate outside of direct sanction by the state's fundamental law, which can make them more independent and variable. Parties have existed in democracies because of a basic but necessary service they provide: connecting the public with their politics. Without parties, democracies rarely survive.

Political parties occupy a unique space in American politics partly because they were never intended to be a part of the system. The writers of the United States Constitution constructed the document with very specific intent, careful design of governmental institutions, and thoughtful allocations of powers to those institutions to keep them in balance. For example, as the Congress was directly elected by the public, that branch was designed to initiate public policy. The House would write and pass any taxing or spending legislation to keep itself accountable to the electorate. The writers of the Constitution thus were very intentional in every institution, every power, each clause included to achieve a specific purpose. The Constitution is also notable for those things it left out, with the same intentional and methodical approach. Nowhere in the US Constitution are political parties directly mentioned, which in itself signals the preferences of its writers.<sup>22</sup>

Most specifically, the United States was designed to prevent the emergence of parties at the national level. The framers created the federal Constitution of 1789 with the intent of using the large geographic space of the thirteen states as an impediment to the natural formation of organized interests or parties.<sup>23</sup> Madison's reformulation of republican theory, which previously demanded republics be small and compact in nature, meant that "a greater variety . . . [of] interests would exist in the United States. This would necessitate a system of representation that would result in a government of nationally minded elites who would largely see beyond the many parochial interests of the states (though they would be cognizant of those state interests)." There would be no national parties and the interests, though quite real, would be numerous, often cross-cutting in their influences, and usually state focused. Alliances of such interests would be temporary and unstable—not unstable in such a way as to threaten the new nation; rather, it would be a salutary fluidity that would leave national elites free to forge a consensus on most policies that concerned the nation as a whole.

The Federalist promoters of the Constitution believed that there was no difference between organized interests, what we would commonly call "interest groups" today, and political parties. Both parties and interests, according to the Constitution's writers, were minority splinter groups that put their particular preferences over that of the public good. Madison and

his fellows thought that parties would undermine the public consensus so carefully designed to be extracted by the federal government. As Madison famously warned,

So strong is the propensity to fall into mutual animosities that where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions, and excite their most violent conflicts.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, parties had all the vices associated with the crassness that critics of interest groups see in them.

Mostly, parties threatened a tyranny of the minority, and therefore the Constitution intended to keep them from becoming federally organized. Parties had already organized at the state level, reinforcing the idea that they were a net negative contributor to American politics. The Federalists' hope was that permanent national parties would not exist, and a more fluid world of constantly shifting and reforming alliances between interest groups would prevail. This more flexible political world would have the consequence of less rigidly constraining politicians by the very real pressure of local factional demands as they sought to achieve the greater good. The framers were not naive and did not expect saints in politics. But they did seek to create a world that filtered public demands through the considered judgment of an educated and more farsighted elite.

Certainly, the idea of long-lasting national parties was something the Constitution's authors never envisioned. For some time after parties formed, many earlier leaders hoped that such national organizations would be, at most, temporary creations. Jefferson certainly thought so, seeing the Republican Party as a one-time creation that would eventually die a natural death, not to be replaced.<sup>25</sup>

Parties had already formed in the colonies prior to the War of Independence, though, so the Constitution's writers also knew that they were inevitable.<sup>26</sup> Even if parties only existed at the local or state level, Madison admitted that the only way to prevent the emergence of parties anywhere was to restrict the liberties of free speech, assembly, and petitioning the government for a redress of grievances. To eliminate parties, freedom itself would have to be abolished, an exchange the writers of the Constitution were unwilling to make. *Federalist* no. 10 posited that the large geographic footprint of the United States would create a logistical barrier to national-level party organization emergence. There was no specific prohibition on

parties written into the Constitution, itself an admission that national party organization development was possible and indeed probable.

With many other elements of government, a structure or strategy exists in the Constitution.<sup>27</sup> For instance, as much as the presidency has evolved over more than 200 years, it remains tethered in a variety of ways to the rules laid out in Article II. Nevertheless, the Constitution's drafters did not intend for political parties to emerge at the federal level, so there is no roadmap for their operation.<sup>28</sup> The lack of guidance from government may help explain why American parties developed and progressed in haphazard ways, with a history of making up their own rules as they went along. Parties also were much stronger at the local and state levels than at the national level, though that may have been because of the self-same geographic limitations Madison referenced in *Federalist* no. 10.<sup>29</sup> Even as national-level parties emerged, they quickly followed the model of local party organizations. Local party organizations would fade during the Era of Good Feelings, however, and not return until they followed suit of their national-level counterparts.<sup>30</sup>

Post-Independence Americans were partisans because of their local organization. The federal government's operations were minimal and distant, but local government was omnipresent in the citizenry's lives, and their political party was their lifeline to what was happening in the most active and relevant levels of government: the local community and state.

For those early citizens, the story of Thaddeus McCotter and Kerry Bentivolio would have seemed like democracy run amok. McCotter was a multiple-term incumbent in the US House of Representatives from Michigan. Bentivolio entered the 2012 primary against McCotter as a long-shot candidate, but relied on a primary-era requirement with which the incumbent had surprisingly failed to comply: submitting enough qualified petition signatures to be eligible to run for reelection. McCotter was thus off the ballot, which never would have happened in a system where party organizations conduct their own nomination processes. As an untested candidate who had never sought elective office before, Bentivolio was a rarity: an accidental party nominee. Because of the strength of his Republican Party affiliation in the district, Bentivolio secured the nomination in McCotter's absence and won the seat.

Voters did not embrace Bentivolio, however, and a primary challenge to him two years later resulted in the "accidental" 2012 nominee being replaced after a single term. Bentivolio's candidacy, and the confusion it caused among voters, is a byproduct of the era of the direct primary. When candidates can self-select without any vetting by or connection to a party, they make political information and partisan political linkage much weaker.