Polls, Pols and Parties

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This article traces the growth of public opinion polling on television in the past three presidential elections. This growth is a consequence of the media's interpretive role and the proliferation of primaries in the nominating procedures of the parties. As a consequence, the media have enhanced their role in presidential campaigns.

> He [President Carter] had unquestionably a whole confluence of bad news, bad results. We had the Shah; we had budget cuts. . . . One of the disadvantages of incumbency is that you have to deal with issues.
>
> Robert Strauss, Jimmy Carter's Campaign Manager
> (Quoted on NBC News, March 26, 1980)

> When asked which issues most affected their [voter] choice, they listed helping the poor and the elderly, then foreign affairs. Senator Kennedy has long won the first issue; today he and the President are splitting the second.
>
> Lynn Sherr, ABC Evening News
> March 25, 1980

The interesting feature of these two interpretations from the 1980 New York primary is not their message about Jimmy Carter and Edward Kennedy nor the fact that they disagree on who bears the blame for national problems, but the fact that they sound so similar. And yet the first comes from a Democratic party leader and the second from a television news correspondent. Why do journalists in 1980 sound so much like—even play the part of—party officials?

The public's perceived neutrality of the media combined with the ap-

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parent objectivity of public opinion polling supports the credibility of journalistic interpretations of elections like the one quoted above. Journalists' interpretive role and the use of polls place network correspondents and print reporters on equal, or even superior, terms with long-term partisan pundits who have made careers of understanding, or even predicting, their constituent's opinions. Thus it is important in understanding both presidential elections in particular, and ties between citizenry and leaders in general, to observe the role of television polls in recent presidential campaigns.

The 1968 National Democratic Party Convention adopted several reforms that encouraged wide participation by the electorate in nominations through primaries, caucuses, and state conventions. The implementation of those reforms by the state party organizations produced a rapid increase in the number of presidential primaries.[1] As table 1 indicates, the number of states holding presidential primaries jumped in 1972 and has steadily increased each quadrennia since then. In 1972,

TABLE 1

NUMBER OF STATES HOLDING PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES AND PERCENT OF CONVENTION DELEGATES FROM PRIMARY STATES, 1948-80

	Number of States Primaries		Percentage of Delegates	
Year	Democratic	Republican	Democratic	Republican
1948	14	12	36.3	36.0
1952	15	13	38.7	39.0
1956	19	19	42.7	44.8
1960	16	15	38.3	38.6
1964	17	17	45.7	45.6
1968	17	16	37.5	34.3
1972	23	22	60.5	52.7
1976	29	28	72.6	67.9
1980	31	35	71.4	76.0

Source: Arterton, 1978; Jewell and Olson, 1978; Price, 1982.

[1] The McGovern-Frazier reforms were printed in *Mandate for Reform: A Report of the Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection to the Democratic National Committee*. Austin Ranney (1975), a member of the McGovern-Frazier Commission, has summarized the intent of the reformers. Many others have evaluated the democratic character of the reforms. See Caesar, 1979; 1982; Keech and Matthews, 1976; Kirkpatrick, 1976; 1978; Lengle, 1981; Lengle and Shafer, 1976; McWilliams, 1976; Pomper, 1977; Ranney, 1972; 1977; 1978; Sullivan et al., 1974.

twenty-three states held Democratic primaries; in 1976, twenty-nine states did; and in 1980, thirty-one elected Democratic convention delegates.

The Republicans show a similar pattern of delegate selection by primaries. The number of Republican primaries increased from sixteen to twenty-two in 1972, to twenty-eight in 1976, and to thirty-five in 1980. Indeed three-fourths of the Republican delegates were selected from primary states in 1980 while only one-third were from primary states in 1968.

The 1984 party conventions will end the rapid growth of primaries. Fewer states will hold either Democratic or Republican primaries in the upcoming campaign than in earlier years. Furthermore, Democratic reforms provide for greater representation among elected officials at the 1984 convention than recent conventions. This means the percentage of delegates selected by primary election will be slightly smaller in 1984 than in 1980. Nevertheless, the substantial growth of primaries during the 1970s guarantees that primary elections will be the dominant procedure of delegate selection for the 1984 conventions. (At this writing, April 1, 1983, neither the Democratic National Committee nor the Republican National Committee would estimate the number of primary states or the percentage of delegates from primary states in the 1984 campaign.)

One unintended consequence of the McGovern-Frazier reforms was to increase the importance of mass media in presidential nominations. More and more often during the past three presidential campaigns, television correspondents and print journalists have explained the meaning of the results of statewide caucuses and primaries to the nation. As Rhodes Cook (1980:177) notes, "It was not the voters who had first say as to who won and lost, it was the media." This political commentary has, in turn, affected party perceptions of candidate success and failure and thus actual success or failure in subsequent primaries. Edmund Muskie's 9 percent plurality in New Hampshire was a "poor showing" in 1972; George McGovern's 6 percent margin in California was a "setback for the frontrunner" in 1972; Jimmy Carter's 6 percent victory was "decisive" in New Hampshire in 1980; and Edward Kennedy's 10 percent deficit in New Hampshire was "devastating" in 1980. All of these media interpretations of electoral contests share one characteristic; the interpretation depended on a particular benchmark of success. That benchmark was beating journalistic expectations, not getting the most party convention delegates.

The media's technique for establishing the expectations is, of course, imprecise. Local leaders, campaign organizers, and journalists themselves informally discuss the chances of victory for a candidate during the campaign. Through mutual discourse, they develop predictions

about the candidate's probability for winning. As with most news, some reporters are more important than others in establishing the expectations. For example, David Broder's *Washington Post* article about Edmund Muskie's difficulty in attracting New Hampshire Democrats probably influenced several other journalists to believe that the Maine senator's early popularity was overrated. Similarly, Johnny Apple's *New York Times* article about Jimmy Carter's effective organization probably increased stock in the Georgia governor. These few instances of journalistic virtuoso notwithstanding, the usual process of establishing expectations is knowledgeable speculation, at best, and "pack journalism" (Crouse, 1972) at worst.

The media's practice of measuring a candidate's vote total against pre-election expectations was the subject of criticism following the 1972 election. Particularly noteworthy were the 1968 and 1972 New Hampshire Democratic primaries in which the media described the second place candidates as doing better than the predicted margins. Bowing to criticism, the press reported the 1976 (Bicker, 1978; Patterson, 1980) and the 1980 (Robinson, 1981) primaries differently than in earlier years. Winning became the benchmark of success; the press no longer emphasized "unexpectedly high support" for second and third place candidates nor "disappointing strength" for first place candidates. Being first produced news coverage (Patterson, 1980). Jules Witcover (1977) notes that coverage of first place finishes aided Jimmy Carter's "marathon" campaign strategy. By winning some primaries early and by entering so many primaries, Carter assured himself of continual coverage even though he sometimes faced only token opposition.

With either definition of success—beating expectations or being first—the media's tools for reporting primaries include public opinion polls. First, pre-election polls support and even provide substance for journalistic speculation about success. For example, a *Boston Globe* poll on the day after David Broder's 1972 prognostication about Muskie's New Hampshire difficulties gave credibility to the *Washington Post* article. Furthermore, Broder's evidence of Muskie's difficulty in popularity was a decrease in the approval ratings of previous polls; the benchmark for success became the margin between two pre-election polls.

Second, the media's technique for reporting primaries relies on the use of election day or exit polls.[2] Commentators crosstabulate voters'

[2] The term "exit" polls refers to the technique of interviewing voters upon their exit from the polling place. In 1980, the staff of the CBS Election and Survey Unit wanted to change the name of the exit polls to election day polls, a more descriptive name. However, audience familiarity with the term exit poll prevailed over clarity. For a discussion of election day polls, see Levy (1983).

backgrounds and issue positions with candidate preference. With this type of analysis, statewide reaction to various aspects of the campaign can be explained according to the idiosyncrasies of a particular state or the generalities of a national campaign.

The media, then, are using polls in primary campaigns to evaluate the strength of and causes for a candidate's support—a role traditionally played by partisan insiders. Similarly, the "scientific" quality of journalists' observations increasingly gives them the same status in the eyes of the public as party leaders have. These phenomena are specific examples of the tendency for mass media and political institutions to develop mutually interdependent functions, (for example, see Segal, 1973; Rivers, 1982). This interdependence suggests several hypotheses about the use of public opinion polls on television news programs. First, the use of polls should increase along with the increase in primaries. Second, the importance and prominence of polls on television should increase as primaries have become the dominant procedure for selecting delegates. Finally, the scheduling of polls on television should parallel the scheduling of primaries during the year. I now turn to a test of these conjectures.

Poll Stories on Evening News Programs

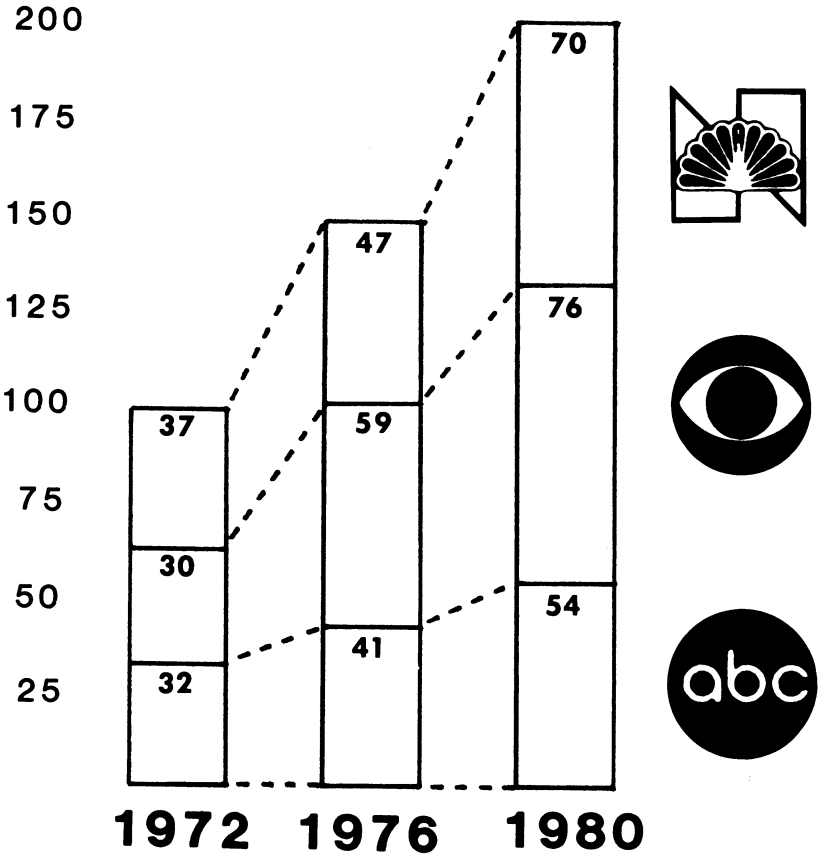
The networks followed the pattern of presidential primaries since the McGovern-Frazier reforms by doubling their use of polls on evening news from 1972 to 1980. In 1972, the first complete presidential year that the evening news was archived, ABC, CBS, and NBC reported ninety-nine election-related news stories that used polling data or made reference to polls with more than a single sentence. Figure 1 shows a steady increase in poll stories with each succeeding presidential election, to 147 in 1976 and 200 in 1980.[3] Clearly producers and correspondents were finding poll data useful and informative in writing their reports on the campaign and in deciding what news to communicate to the public.

But the increase of poll stories is not just Parkinson's Law in practice, because television time does *not* expand to meet the work involved. In broadcasting time is a scarce resource and the evening network news has been only twenty-three minutes long since 1962. Allocating time to one

[3] Poll stories were coded from the Television News Index and Abstracts (Vanderbilt Television News Archive, 1972; 1976; 1980). Additionally, all poll stories from the 1980 campaign were viewed in videotape for content and visual presentation. See Broh, 1983. A poll story was determined by its inclusion in the index under the heading "Presidential Election Campaign" and the subheading "Polls, Opinion." Additionally, the abstract from each candidate entry was checked for a one sentence statement about public opinion polls. Coder reliability was checked for three months of the 1980 data with virtually perfect replication by two student coders and the author.

FIGURE 1

NUMBER OF POLL REPORTS ON EVENING NETWORK NEWS DURING PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION YEARS



type of news story means taking time away from another; the increasing number of poll stories reflects a growing emphasis on social scientific modes of election analysis in journalism.[4]

[4] Two books are particularly important in the press's adoption of social science techniques of analysis. Henry Lieberman (1982), retired science editor of the *New York Times*, told me that Philip Meyer's (1973) *Precision Journalism* produced a renewed interest in public opinion polling at the *Times*. Richard Salant (1982), director of CBS News from 1961 to 1979, told me that Theodore White's *The Making of the President 1960* influenced his decision to begin polling at CBS. White (1961) explains the Kennedy campaign's ability to project vote totals before the networks on election night, 1960. Shortly after reading that, Salant instituted CBS's "Voter Profile Analysis."

This growing emphasis is reflected not only in the number of poll stories but also in their placement. Being first in a newscast is like being on the front page of a newspaper or the cover of a magazine. The lead story in a network newscast is often the boldest headline of the next morning's newspapers. Similarly, the final stories of a newscast are the human interest stories. They provide entertainment and introspection for the viewer, and often for the correspondent. They are what magazine journalists call the "back of the book." Thus a rough indicator of a story's importance is its placement in the broadcast, since the most important events come first.

Poll stories in election years have received increasingly favorable positions in news programs. Figure 2 cumulates the percentage of poll stories appearing at various positions in the news programs. For example, 8 percent of the poll stories were the lead story in 1972; 15 percent were first or second; 24 percent were first, second, or third. In 1976, 21 percent of the poll stories were leads; 34 percent were first or second; and 45 percent were first, second, or third.

Figure 2 illustrates several related characteristics about the placement of poll stories. First, 1980 had more poll stories as leads than 1976, which had more than 1972. The first position of poll stories on the news, in part, results from greater use of voter polls in state primaries. Often presidential primaries were the leading events of the day and a poll elaborating the reasons for voter choice and showing trends toward one candidate or another was vital information for understanding the primary.

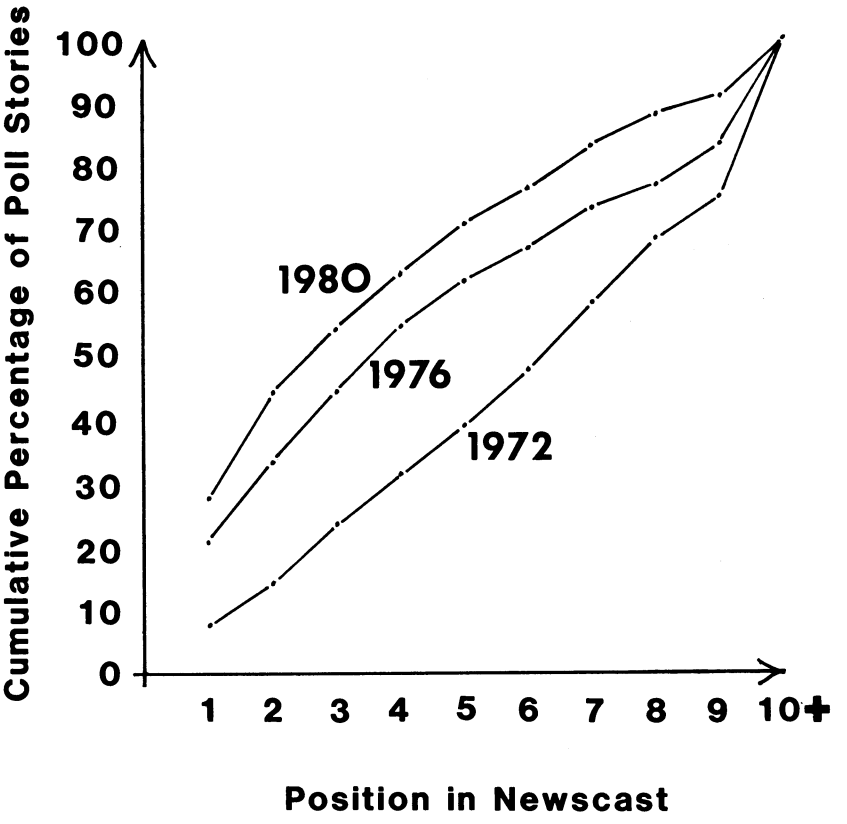
The second characteristic about the placement of polls revealed in figure 2 is the generally more prominent position of *all* poll stories in recent election years. The line in the graph representing 1980 rises at a faster rate than the one representing 1976, which rises at a faster rate than the one for 1972. This property of cumulative percentages means that increasingly more stories appear at or near the beginning of a newscast now than in earlier years. Not only do more poll stories lead the newscasts in 1980 than in 1976, but more stories were second in 1980 than 1976—not just first *and* second. The trend toward stories at the beginning is monotonically upward with each succeeding election.

Figure 2 also illustrates the obverse characteristic of poll stories at the end of the newscast. Fewer poll stories in 1980 fell into the category of "soft news" or were only tangentially related to the news of the day than in 1976, and 1976 had fewer than 1972. This characteristic is indicated by the steep slope of the line in the ninth and tenth position of the 1972 newscast and the less steep line in 1976 and 1980, respectively.

At least one reason that poll stories have increased in number and

FIGURE 2

POLL STORIES ON EVENING NETWORK NEWS IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION YEARS CUMULATED BY POSITION IN NEWSCAST



prominence is the fact that they follow the politics of primaries. As the number of primaries increased, the number of polls on television increased. As the importance of pledged delegates selected in primaries increased at the nominating conventions, the prominence of polls on television increased. Additional data on television polling demonstrate this contention.

The timing of poll stories throughout the campaign conforms to the schedules of presidential primaries. In 1968, the selection procedure for half the delegates to the Democratic national party convention was underway by June 2; in 1976, selection procedure for half the delegates

was underway by May 18; and in 1980 selection procedure for half the delegates was underway by May 4. The selection of delegates by the states has taken place earlier with each election.[5] Furthermore, the newsworthy events of delegate selection begin earlier now than in previous years. In the 1972 campaign, the New Hampshire primary in late February was the first nationwide press story about the campaign. In 1976, the Iowa caucuses in late January were the first press story. In the 1980 campaign, the Florida straw poll in late fall 1979 was the first press event.

The timing of poll stories on television follows this trend. Figure 3 indicates only 2 percent of the poll stories in 1972 were broadcast in January. The percentage of January reports was higher, 7 percent, in both 1976 and 1980. The increasing number of early reports for each presidential year is indicated by the steeper slope of the 1980 line than the 1976 line, which is steeper than the 1972 line. Note, for example, that half, i.e., 5 percent, of the 1980 poll stories were broadcast by late June. In 1972, half of the poll stories had not appeared on television until early September. The year 1980 had the most poll stories the earliest.

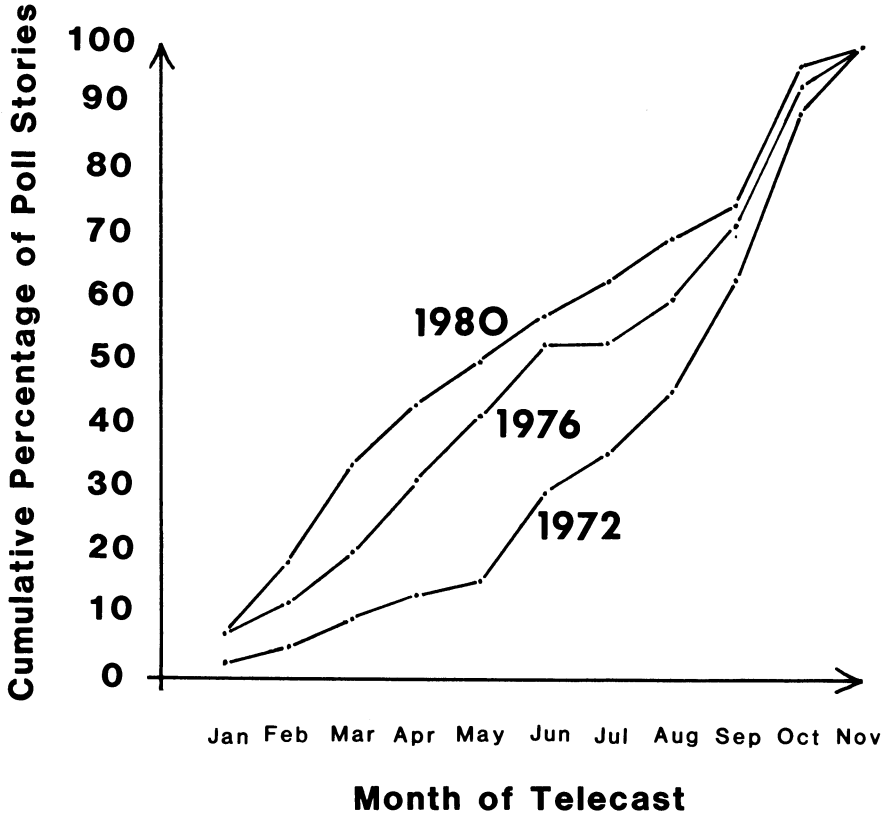
A further indication of the importance of primaries in the eyes of television pollsters is the relative importance of pre- and postconvention polls. By the time of the party convention in 1972, the networks broadcast slightly more than one-third of their poll stories for the year. In 1976, over half of the poll stories were broadcast by convention time and in 1980, the percentage approached two-thirds. With the quadrennial growth of polling, these figures represent more stories as well as higher percentages. Thus the growth of poll stories by convention time is even greater than the cumulative percentages indicate. In 1972, 1976, and 1980 respectively, the networks broadcast 36, 78, and 125 poll stories before the party conventions. Clearly poll stories during the nomination period have grown and received greater television coverage over the past three presidential elections.

Finally, the increased emphasis in television coverage of primaries with poll stories can be seen in the increase in the number of state polls, since primaries are, by definition, state contests. In 1972, the networks broadcast five times as many national polls as state polls; in 1976, the networks still broadcast over twice as many national as state; in 1980, the ratio was about one-to-one, with slightly more state polls than national polls (see table 2).

[5] The scheduling of state primaries early in the election year is known as "front loading," a practice the Democratic party recently discouraged. Rule 10 of the Commission on Presidential Nomination, James B. Hunt, Jr., chairman (1982) exempted Iowa and New Hampshire from a mid-March to mid-June "window" for delegate selection.

FIGURE 3

POLL STORIES ON EVENING NETWORK NEWS IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION YEARS CUMULATED BY MONTH OF TELECAST



DISCUSSION

Polling on television reinforces a long-term trend in United States presidential elections toward direct representation.[6] From the debates at the constitutional convention over the dangers of a popularly elected executive, to the progressive reforms of the twentieth century in selecting the president, to the McGovern-Frazier Commission mandate for wider

[6] An excellent discussion of the normative history of presidential nominating procedures can be found in Caesar, 1979; 1982.

TABLE 2

NUMBER OF NATIONAL POLLS AND STATE POLLS ON EVENING NETWORK NEWS DURING PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION YEARS, 1972, 1976, 1980

	Election Year			
	1972	1976	1980	Total
National Polls	74	108	91	273
State Polls	15	45	97	157
Total	89	153	188	430

participation by the rank-and-file, we can see a trend away from nomination by deliberative bodies that are only indirectly responsible to public opinion. The tendency has been toward binding influence for citizen activists, a model of representation supported by the growth of primaries and the increasing presentation of public opinion polls in the media.

This trend toward direct representation has had the unintended consequence of increasing the importance of television. With polling, the networks could, and did, provide credible, professional commentary on the meaning of each electoral contest. Television correspondents, in addition to the party elite, become the interpreters of electoral opinion.

Furthermore, networks enhanced these interpretive powers with timing and placement of polls that were parallel to the nominating procedures of the parties. Television reports the result of one primary and the polls associated with it, in time for voters of the next primary to hear media interpretations. The proliferation of primaries means that this sequence—primary, poll, primary—takes place early, frequently, and in large quantities. Voters in later primaries are likely to use the televised poll results to make their own judgments about the issue position, attractiveness, or viability of a candidate.

Before the growth of primaries and polling, party officials made these judgments about possible candidates. Primaries, to be sure, served to decrease the number of candidates under consideration by the party, and to provide a testing ground on candidate capabilities for skeptical party officials. Thus John Kennedy proved he was "electable" in 1960 with primary victories in Wisconsin and West Virginia. But, he proved it to convention delegates and party officials—not to the next round of primary voters who would *select* the convention delegates and party officials. As a consequence, party elites, rather than party primary voters, decided about the qualifications and electability of a candidate. In that setting, the media had less influence on the arbiters of candidate success—party leaders—than the media now have on the current arbiters of candidate success—the primary voters.

The Democratic Party has recently taken steps to reassert the role of party leaders and elected officials in the national convention and therefore in preconvention activities. The Hunt Commission (1982), for example, adopted rules calling for a shorter primary/caucus season, a greater representation for the Congressional Policy Committees, a reduced representation for candidate-pledged delegates, more flexibility in electing unpledged delegates, and the elimination of crossover primaries. The underlying theme to these reforms is that the party organization is retaking power away from the rank-and-file and returning it to its leadership.

But the rank-and-file are not the only entity to lose power with the new nominating procedures. By decreasing the role of mass-based participation in primaries and caucuses, the party regulars decrease the role of the media in interpreting the outcomes of state nominating contests. As such, the Hunt Commission took power from the mass media and returned it to the party. In short, the media, especially television networks, lost an increment of power to the party organization with the recent Democratic party reforms.

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