

Making the once invisible primary more visible

Dr. Martin Cohen

New Year's resolutions haven't been broken yet and already the political pundit class has turned the calendar to 2016 to discuss who will be the major party nominees. Why the rush? Why the flurry of news stories about 2016 when flurries are still falling a full year in advance of the first votes being cast. The media is rushing to cover what scholars have termed the invisible primary. It is the battle prospective candidates wage for support that takes place largely out of the public's view. Thanks to increased research into this phenomenon the media has caught on and is making the once invisible primary more visible to those desiring to follow it. Scholars and pundits alike agree that what happens in 2015 will largely determine what happens in 2016. The candidates who raise the most money, garner the most endorsements, and achieve the highest poll standing will be very difficult to beat when voters actually begin to go to the polls many months from now.

In 2008, my co-authors and I published a book titled *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform* that chronicles the history of presidential nominations and sheds some light onto why the invisible primary is so important to the outcome of the nomination battles waged in both parties. The main premise of *The Party Decides* is that party elites no longer are able to control nominations the way they used to in the era when they got together at the national convention and brokered the nomination in those infamous smoke-filled rooms. Reforms to the process in the 1970s took power out of the hands of the party elites and gave it to rank-and-file voters by requiring convention delegates to be selected in primaries and caucuses across the country. No longer could party elites privately assess the candidates, wait until the convention to share that information with each other, and discreetly pick who the party's standard-bearer would be. However, we argue in the book that party elites have adjusted to the new system and now use the year before voting begins (the invisible primary) to feel out the candidates and give their support to the one they like the most. This support comes mainly in the form of endorsements which are cues to other party leaders (and to voters) that a candidate is legitimate and worthy of support. These endorsements are a strong predictor of success. From 1980-2000, the candidate with the most elite endorsements prior to the Iowa caucuses won the nomination every single time. Furthermore, we find that endorsements are a better predictor of success than poll standing, money, and media coverage.

So, if you are looking to this article for a prediction about who will be fighting it out in November of 2016, it is still too early to tell. The invisible primary is underway but it still has months to go before it concludes. When the ball drops on January 1, 2016 I believe we will have a good idea of who will be the nominee despite the fact that not a single vote will have been cast. Look for the candidates with the most party support, as measured by elite endorsements, to be the ones that come out on top with the voters.

