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## A Historical Analysis of the Democratic Primary Debate Requirements: An Approach for Understanding the Democratic National Committee's 2020 Rules Change

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# A Historical Analysis of the Democratic Primary Debate Requirements: An Approach for Understanding the Democratic National Committee's 2020 Rules Change

## Abstract

In February 2019, the Democratic National Committee (DNC) created a set of comprehensive rules governing the qualifications for participating in the 2020 primary debates. The rules, the first of their kind, were the result of over a decade of primary debate mishaps and disagreements. Historically, it was not difficult for candidates to qualify for primary debates. There were usually fewer than eight candidates on the stage and the debates did not play a large role in the primary winnowing process. But as the number of candidates rose, and in light of the Republican's experience in 2016, the Democrats moved to create new rules to re-assert control over the process in 2020. This had three important effects. First, it helped to winnow down the field during the 2020 primary, as once candidates were not on the stage, they were effectively shut out of the media spotlight and thus out of the public's consideration. Second, the new rules demonstrate an effort by the party to reduce the media's power and increase their own, though that process is incomplete. Third, these rules illustrate a key dilemma for the DNC in the modern era. They are attempting to assert control without appearing to assert control, thus posing an interesting challenge moving forward.

## Keywords

primary debate, democratic national committee, presidential primary, debate requirements, american politics, presidential debates, democrats, presidential primary, grassroots funding, 2020 democratic primary, Social Sciences, Political Science, Matthew Levendusky, Levendusky, Matthew

## Disciplines

American Politics | Political Science

**A Historical Analysis of the Democratic Primary Debate Requirements: An Approach for  
Understanding the Democratic National Committee's 2020 Rules Change**

**By**

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**This thesis is submitted in fulfillment of**

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**Abstract**

In February 2019, the Democratic National Committee (DNC) created a set of comprehensive rules governing the qualifications for participating in the 2020 primary debates. The rules, the first of their kind, were the result of over a decade of primary debate mishaps and disagreements. Historically, it was not difficult for candidates to qualify for primary debates. There were usually fewer than eight candidates on the stage and the debates did not play a large role in the primary winnowing process. But as the number of candidates rose, and in light of the Republican's experience in 2016, the Democrats moved to create new rules to re-assert control over the process in 2020. This had three important effects. First, it helped to winnow down the field during the 2020 primary, as once candidates were not on the stage, they were effectively shut out of the media spotlight and thus out of the public's consideration. Second, the new rules demonstrate an effort by the party to reduce the media's power and increase their own, though that process is incomplete. Third, these rules illustrate a key dilemma for the DNC in the modern era. They are attempting to assert control without appearing to assert control, thus posing an interesting challenge moving forward.

## Introduction

In early August 2019, Democratic presidential candidate Senator Kirsten Gillibrand was offering branded t-shirts in exchange for a \$1 donation. Assuming the custom t-shirt cost \$5, the shipping and handling cost \$5 and the digital advertisement cost \$2 per realized donation, she was spending \$12 to acquire a \$1 donation.<sup>1</sup> Why would a candidate—especially a candidate struggling for money and recognition—spend so much to acquire so little? Normally, we would say such an attempt defies logic, but here, there is clear logic: she was attempting to meet the Democratic National Committee’s (DNC) grassroots fundraising threshold for the third primary debate on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

To qualify for the September debate, Gillibrand or any other candidate would need to receive at least 130,000 individual donations and/or receive 2% percent in at least four qualifying polls.<sup>2</sup> At the time of her request, Gillibrand failed to meet the donor threshold and only had one poll with over 2% support.<sup>3</sup> To her chagrin, she failed to make the debate and subsequently dropped out of the race.<sup>4</sup> Gillibrand’s story is not unique. Many other candidates—from Kamala Harris to Cory Booker to Steve Bullock—would use similarly counterintuitive tactics to try to

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<sup>1</sup> Shirt price on customink.com; Standard Group on UPS.com; digital advertising assuming .5% penetration on Facebook.

<sup>2</sup> “DNC Announces Details for Third Presidential Primary Debate,” Democrats, May 29, 2019, <https://democrats.org/news/third-debate/>

<sup>3</sup> Burns, Alexander. “Gillibrand Drops Out of 2020 Democratic Presidential Race.” The New York Times. The New York Times, August 28, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/28/us/politics/kirsten-gillibrand-2020-drop-out.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Dan Merica, “Kirsten Gillibrand Drops out of 2020 Presidential Race,” CNN (Cable News Network, August 29, 2019), <https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/28/politics/gillibrand-drops-out-of-race/index.html>

make the primary debate stage during the 2020 campaign. The DNC's decision to include fundraising qualifications fundamentally changed the 2020 Democratic primary race.

This thesis works to understand why the DNC added these rules in 2020 and what effect they had on the process. Looking at the historical process, I argue that the party learned—or at least tried to learn—from earlier cycles and they developed rules that would help them control which candidates would appear on the debate stage, without appearing to shape it *too* much. These conflicting incentives reverberated through this process, and ultimately determined which candidates survived and which did not.

Primary debates are so central because primary voters cannot use partisanship as a heuristic device. In a general election, most voters simply vote for the candidate from their party. But in a primary election, all candidates share the same party, so the heuristic provides little help in making the decision. Candidates therefore must work hard to clearly differentiate themselves from their rivals on some salient dimension. However, in a crowded field and in a fractured media market, capturing and holding the public's attention is extremely difficult. The primary debates offer candidates—especially those struggling to receive media coverage—an opportunity to do just that. In fact, the first 2020 Democratic debates on June 26 and 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019 had a total of 33.4 million viewers, or 13 million more viewers than an average Sunday Night Football game.<sup>5</sup>

Unsurprisingly then, a strong debate appearance—and a consensus among post-debate commentators that a candidate scored political points—boosts a candidate's standing in the polls

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<sup>5</sup> Cline, Seth. "Americans Have Stopped Watching the Democratic Debates." U.S. News & World Report. U.S. News & World Report, December 20, 2019. <https://www.usnews.com/news/elections/articles/2019-12-20/americans-have-stopped-watching-the-democratic-debates>.

and increases donations to his or her campaign.<sup>6</sup> For example, Senator Kamala Harris' breakout performance in the first Democratic debate in June 2019 contributed significantly to her rise in the polls and perceived legitimacy.<sup>7</sup> About an hour into the first Democratic debate for 2020, Ms. Harris, a black former prosecutor, criticized frontrunner Joe Biden who was leading the polls at the time, for working with segregationist senators in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>8</sup> Then, she attacked Joe Biden's opposition to bussing in the 1970s, saying "there was a little girl in California who was a part of the second class to ingrate her public schools....and that girl was me."<sup>9</sup> She not only gained popularity for her comments toward Joe Biden, but also from the post-debate coverage that replayed the exchange and exalted her performance. She capitalized on her debate performance, boosting her polling numbers at the expense of Joe Biden's.<sup>10</sup> The debates are especially significant for long-shot candidates, such as Harris, who do not have many other opportunities to present their campaign's pitch to a broad captive audience. Primary debates therefore are a critical aspect of the presidential nomination process and are capable of changing voters' attitudes toward candidates.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Fridkin, Kim L., Patrick J. Kenney, Sarah Allen Gershon, Karen Shafer, and Gina Serignese Woodall. "Capturing the Power of a Campaign Event: The 2004 Presidential Debate in Tempe." *The Journal of Politics* 69, no. 3 (2007): 770-85.

<sup>7</sup> Schouten, Fredreka. "Kamala Harris Shines in Commanding Democratic Debate Performance." CNN. Cable News Network, June 28, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/27/politics/kamala-harris-democratic-debate-performance/index.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Stevens, Matt. "When Kamala Harris and Joe Biden Clashed on Busing and Segregation." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, July 31, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/31/us/politics/kamala-harris-biden-busing.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Stevens, Matt. "Kamala Harris Surges in 3 Polls After Strong Debate Performance." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, July 2, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/02/us/politics/kamala-harris-polls.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Fridkin et al.

Despite the importance of presidential primary debates, the topic is remarkably understudied. Political science research has primarily focused on the party's role in the nomination process and communications scholars have largely directed their attention to identifying the effects of the media's coverage of primaries, debate rhetoric and formats.<sup>12</sup> Here, I examine the requirements for making the primary debate stage and how that process has changed over time, focusing on the 2008, 2012, and 2016 presidential primaries and on the Democratic party. I analyze these earlier elections to try to understand how these events influenced the Democratic party's decision in the 2020 cycle. I also analyze the 2016 Republican primaries, as the Democrats no doubt had this experience in their mind as they deliberated about how to execute their own 2020 primary.

I argue that there were four crucial factors that explain why the DNC changed the primary debate process in 2020. First, I hypothesize that the increase in the number of candidates vying for the party's nomination contributed to the DNC's decision to take control of the debate requirements. The party would like a short-lived and relatively controversy free primary process—a small field where a party insider could easily capture the nomination. Their fear is that a long primary may weaken the ultimate candidate and make it more difficult to unite the party, so the party would prefer a short and relatively conflict-free process. In addition, after witnessing the chaos during the Republican Party's primary in 2016, the DNC decided they wanted a more controlled process. Prior to 2020, the Democratic primary debates played a limited role in winnowing the field, instead allowing candidates to drop out naturally. In 2020,

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<sup>12</sup> Cohen, Marty. *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations before and after Reform*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.; Jamieson, Kathleen Hall, and Christopher Adasiewicz. "What Can Voters Learn from Election Debates?" *Televised Election Debates*, 2000, 25–42.



the DNC would attempt to use strict debate qualification rules to pressure candidates to drop out earlier. They believed that failure to make the debate stage would be a signal to voters that a candidate is no longer viable and therefore pressure the candidate to drop out. Stricter rules would help to winnow the field.

Second, I hypothesize that the DNC made the primary requirement change to clarify previous inconsistencies in the rules. In previous cycles, primary debate rules were either set by the party or news networks. In many cases, the rules were not clearly communicated to candidates. The ensuing confusion and complaints made the DNC seem disorganized and biased.

Third, I hypothesize that the DNC created the rules to take power out of the hands of for-profit media outlets. While media outlets are incentivized by profit, the DNC is concerned with producing a viable candidate in the general election. The misaligned incentives created friction between the party and news outlets. The DNC created a policy that works in the party's favor.

Finally, I hypothesize that the new criteria, which are stricter than in past cycles, disproportionately hurt longshot candidates. The rules make it more difficult to qualify for debates and function to winnow the field quickly. Better known candidates with organized campaigns and early funding are much more likely to make the debate stage and stand out to voters.

This thesis begins with a discussion of the previous political science and communications literature on the topic, and then presents a historical analysis of previous debate requirements with a focus on the 2008, 2016 and 2020 election cycles. After the analysis, I discuss my hypotheses and the evidence that supports them. Finally, I conclude by summarizing the findings and their importance and offering advice on future research.

## Literature Review

A political party, according to Edmund Burke, is an association of persons united by a common principle.<sup>13</sup> In *Political Parties*, Duverger classifies political parties as organized groups seeking power through Democratic elections or revolution.<sup>14</sup> While these two scholars define parties using political theory, Robert Hucksburn offers a more pragmatic definition. He believes parties are “an autonomous group of citizens having the purpose of making nominations and contesting elections in the hope of gaining control over governmental power through the capture of public offices and the organization of government.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Aldrich believes that competition for office is the “singular, defining characteristic of the major American political party.”<sup>16</sup> Aldrich concludes that these groups are ultimately concerned with winning above all else.<sup>17</sup> A political party is thus an organized group of people that try to elect politicians that share their common principles.

Political scholars are consistent in their view that parties seek to recruit candidates that can win elections to implement their policy goals. In Down’s view, parties seek to win elections and translate them into legislative achievements.<sup>18</sup> The party’s new policies will help them gain new supporters in future elections. In theory, the relationship between elections and policy creates a positive feedback loop. In sum, parties are tasked with finding the candidates that are

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<sup>13</sup> Burke, Edmund. *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents: Volume 1 Paperback*. New Edition ed., Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2012. [muse.jhu.edu/book/18234](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/18234).

<sup>14</sup> Duverger, M. *Political Parties*. London: Methuen, 1978.

<sup>15</sup> Huckshorn, R. J. *Political Parties in America*. Monterey: Brooks-Cole Publishing Company, 1984.

<sup>16</sup> Aldrich, John H. *Why Parties?: Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, 283, 12.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>18</sup> Downs, Anthony. “An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy.” *Journal of Political Economy* 65, no. 2 (1957): 135-50. Accessed February 19, 2020.

best able to win elections and support the party agenda. Using this definition, scholars have attempted to determine the specific groups within a party that set the party's platform and control the nomination process.

Scholars disagree on who wields power in political parties. Schattsneider's theory emphasizes the importance of interest groups. His theory assumes that government authority is for specific policy purposes.<sup>19</sup> He finds that a party that can serve interest groups and enact their policies will be successful in the long-run. Similarly, McCarty and Schickler conclude that parties are best viewed as coalitions of intense policy demanders.<sup>20</sup> Cohen notes that "across the entire span of American history, parties behave in the same basic way—as vehicles by which the most energized segments of the population attempt to pull government policy toward their own preferences."<sup>21</sup> These scholars place interest groups and activists at the center of the party. While these theories are important for understanding how party platforms and policy are crafted, the influence of intense-policy demanders and interest groups is subdued early in the presidential primary process. Instead, the political elite play an outsized role at the beginning of the nomination season.

Unlike congressional primaries, to succeed in a presidential primary, a candidate needs to develop a large organization, a strong fundraising base, and endorsements from key political leaders. In congressional and local primary elections, the barriers to entry are relatively low and

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<sup>19</sup> Hacker, Jacob S., and Paul Pierson. "After the 'Master Theory': Downs, Schattschneider, and the Rebirth of Policy-Focused Analysis." *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 3 (2014): 643–62. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592714001637>.

<sup>20</sup> McCarty, Nolan, and Eric Schickler. "On the Theory of Parties." *Annual Review of Political Science* 21, no. 1 (November 2018): 175–93. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-061915-123020>.

<sup>21</sup> Cohen, Marty. *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations before and after Reform*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

a robust grassroots campaign can carry the day. In 2018, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez famously defeated Joe Crowley, a 20-year veteran in the House and establishment Democrat, in the primary for New York's 14<sup>th</sup> district. In this sort of local contest, a long-shot has at least a chance to defeat an establishment candidate.

However, due to the complex nature of the presidential nomination process, the barriers to entry are extremely high. To be competitive, candidates must establish a large cash base and a strong campaign organization even before the first primary or caucus.<sup>22</sup> First, candidates are forced to campaign in states in which many of them have never competed. They need to develop new relationships with local organizers that can help them host events and increase their name recognition. Candidates without national appeal or connections have a lot of trouble developing these networks. Moreover, candidates have dozens of expenses that they need to cover, including campaign offices, staff salaries and advertisements. In addition, Democratic campaigns need hundreds of thousands of dollars for voter registration files for early primary states. These files help the candidates determine where to focus their campaign's energy in the early states.<sup>23</sup> If a candidate does well in the early states, they will need additional funds to mobilize their campaign across over a dozen states for Super Tuesday, assuming they have not already done so. The vast network and extreme costs associated with presidential primaries make it difficult for lesser known local politicians or non-billionaires to compete.

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<sup>22</sup> Adkins, Randall E., and Andrew J. Dowdle. "The Money Primary: What Influences the Outcome of Pre-Primary Presidential Nomination Fundraising?" *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2002): 256-75. Accessed February 19, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/27552387](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27552387).

<sup>23</sup> DeSilver, Drew. "Voter Files: What Are They, How Are They Used and Are They Accurate?" Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center, February 15, 2018. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/02/15/voter-files-study-qa/>.

Primary candidates are more dependent on those with connections, also known as the party elite, than they are in congressional primaries—for example, think of the crucial role played by South Carolina Representative Jim Clyburn in 2020. His endorsement of Vice President Joe Biden galvanized supporters and catapulted Biden to an overwhelming victory in the state.<sup>24</sup> After that victory, the rest of the party consolidated behind him and Biden was able to accumulate an effectively insurmountable delegate lead by mid-March, despite having been declared effectively dead a few weeks prior. While this case is perhaps the most vivid example in recent decades, one could tell a similar (albeit less dramatic) story about Hillary Clinton’s eventual win over Sanders in 2016. Even before the first primary, Hillary Clinton had raised significantly more money and gained more endorsements than Sanders. Being able to unite the party behind you is crucial in a presidential campaign.

Many scholars have focused on how the party elite exercises its power in presidential primary elections. This takes place before the first primary, known as the invisible primary. The group consists of present and former congressmen, senators, governors and wealthy donors. They influence the process by endorsing candidates in the race.<sup>25</sup> Elite endorsements can help candidates by serving as a sign to voters of legitimacy. Elites can also help candidates by tapping into their local connections to integrate the candidate and their campaign staff in the community. Moreover, elites can influence media coverage on behalf of a candidate and help them raise money. Cohen asserts that endorsements are predictors of a candidate’s support, media coverage

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<sup>24</sup> Davis, Susan. “Joe Biden Gets Boost With Endorsement Of Influential South Carolina Democrat.” NPR, February 26, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/26/808856350/clyburn-endorsements-biden-ahead-of-south-carolina-primary>.

<sup>25</sup> Steger, Wayne P. “Conditional Arbiters: The Limits of Political Party Influence in Presidential Nominations.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 49, no. 4 (2016): 709–15.

and fundraising.<sup>26</sup> He concludes that party support is the judgement of a small group of party members. Successful candidates are those that have built strong campaigns during the invisible primary.

Finally, Anderson finds that party elite have an incentive to “nominate an electorally viable and ideologically unifying candidate.”<sup>27</sup> For the elite, supporting a losing candidate is an extremely risky decision. While they may receive a high-level position in the administration if the candidate wins, they can also be ostracized if the candidate loses. The political elite are incentivized to pick candidates that will win and best represent the party.

The Democratic National Committee is the epitome of the political elite. The group is composed of 200 chairs and vice-chairs chosen by primary voters or a state’s Democratic Party’s central committee.<sup>28</sup> The group coordinates the party’s official platform and policy goals. In addition, it controls the party’s official financing and the primary convention. After the convention, the party works with the nominee to raise funds, commission polls and establish a campaign strategy. The DNC, however, is supposed to remain neutral until the convention. Nevertheless, elites in the DNC exert their will on the presidential election process by setting nomination rules and requirements.

Seniors officials create procedures that benefit their desired nominee and that hurt outsiders. For example, all DNC members exert power during the convention as super delegates. Super delegates can pledge support to their desired candidate at the party’s presidential

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<sup>26</sup> Cohen, Marty. *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations before and after Reform*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Anderson, Christopher L. “Which Party Elites Choose to Lead the Nomination Process?” *Political Research Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2013): 61-76. Accessed February 18, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> “The Charter and Bylaws of the Democratic Party of the United States,” 2018.

convention. These unelected and unpledged delegates make up 15% of the total delegate count.<sup>29</sup> In 2016, these delegates were critical for Hillary Clinton's victory over Bernie Sanders. Clinton, who had support from the party elite, had a significant advantage. The DNC changed the rules in 2020 to allow super delegates to vote only if there is no winner after the first ballot at the convention.<sup>30</sup> Sanders complained that it was unfair for super delegates to influence the nomination process because they are supposed to be neutral.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, he alleged that super delegates take away from the democratic nature of the primary process. The 2020 super delegate rule change demonstrates how the party elite influences the nomination process. While the DNC changed the super delegates rules, they also made other rules changes, like the strict debate requirements, that were intended to favor more establishment candidates.

In addition to the party elite, the media plays a large role in the primary process. Geer et al find that it is often difficult for voters to differentiate primary candidates on major policy issues.<sup>32</sup> Thus, primary candidates organize their campaigns in a manner that increases their media coverage.<sup>33</sup> The media educates voters on differences in primary candidates in two major ways. First, media outlets educate voters through news reports and commentary. Second, candidates use the media to speak directly to voters through advertisements and interviews. Per

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Levy, Adam. "DNC Changes Superdelegate Rules in Presidential Nomination Process." CNN, Cable News Network, 25 Aug. 2018, [www.cnn.com/2018/08/25/politics/democrats-superdelegates-voting-changes/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2018/08/25/politics/democrats-superdelegates-voting-changes/index.html).

<sup>31</sup> Strauss, Daniel, et al. "Sanders Supporters Revolt against Superdelegates." POLITICO, 14 Feb. 2016, [www.politico.com/story/2016/02/bernie-sanders-superdelegates-democrats-219286](http://www.politico.com/story/2016/02/bernie-sanders-superdelegates-democrats-219286).

<sup>32</sup> Geer, John, Richard Lau, David Nickerson, and Lynn Vavreck. "Advertising in an Era of Choice." *manuscript. Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions at Vanderbilt University* (2012).

<sup>33</sup> Aldrich, John H. "A Dynamic Model of Presidential Nomination Campaigns." *American Political Science Review* 74, no. 3 (1980): 651–69.

DeFleur's media dependency theory, the media plays a substantial role in altering an audience's beliefs, behaviors and feelings.<sup>34</sup> Thus, it is important for primary candidates to get media coverage. The coverage can help a candidate spread their message and increase their name recognition. Debates and post-debate coverage give candidates access to critical media attention.

The media also creates momentum during the campaign. In their book, *Media and Momentum*, Orren and Polsby emphasize the bandwagon effect whereby "a candidate portrayed in the media as viable and as improving begins to attract more and more support."<sup>35</sup> Positive media coverage of early winners contributes to a voter's awareness and perception of candidates.<sup>36</sup> Debate media coverage gives candidates the opportunity to expand their base and demonstrate their qualifications, character and viability.

Primary debates also help to inform the public about where the candidates stand on the issues. Benoit et al determine that "primary debates increase issue knowledge, influence perceptions of candidates' character, and can alter voter preferences."<sup>37</sup> These effects are larger in primary debates, largely because the candidates are less well-known to voters, so their attitudes are more pliable and susceptible to persuasion. Best and Hubbard reach similar conclusions on the impact of primary debates. The authors conclude that "televised primary

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<sup>34</sup> Ball-Rokeach, S.J., and M.L. DeFleur. "A Dependency Model of Mass-Media Effects." *Communication Research* 3, no. 1 (January 1976): 3–21.

<sup>35</sup> Gary R. Orren and Nelson W. Polsby, *Media and Momentum: the New Hampshire Primary and Nomination Politics* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1987), p.6

<sup>36</sup> John G. Geer, *Nominating Presidents* (New York: Greenwood, 1989); Scott Keeter and Cliff Zukin, *Uniformed Choice: The Failure of the New Presidential Nominating System* (New York: Praeger, 1983); Thomas E. Patterson, *The Mass Media Election: How Americans Choose Their President* (New York: Praeger, 1980).

<sup>37</sup> Benoit et al., *The Primary Decision*, 344, 346; Kendall, *Communication in Presidential Primaries*, 88.



debates can exercise considerable influence on voter preferences.”<sup>38</sup> After being exposed to primary debates, voters increase their political engagement and will use debate performance to evaluate candidates. Americans that do not watch the debates are less knowledgeable and less willing to evaluate candidates. Finally, the authors note that Americans are more likely to change their policy views after watching a debate.<sup>39</sup> By learning about the policy views and arguments of different candidates, Americans become more open to change.

Since a voter watching the debate becomes more willing to change their views, a solid debate performance is extremely important to candidates. Viewers may alter their views to match that of a candidate who performed exceptionally well on the debate stage. Moreover, the rising number of debates gives voters more opportunities to change their minds. Thus, primary debates are increasingly important in determining the eventual nominee.

It is critically important for candidates to try to make the debate stage. If a candidate cannot make the debate, they cannot get the boost their campaign may need to attract a wider audience. Subsequently, they will not rise in the polls and it will be difficult for them to raise more money. Those that are not allowed on the debate stage face a downward spiral that is difficult to escape. Therefore, candidates clearly make it a priority to make the campaign stage.

## **Historical Analysis**

Presidential primary debates have become a common tool for voters and candidates in the nomination process. The history of primary debates is surprisingly longer than that of general

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<sup>38</sup> Best, Samuel, and Clark Hubbard. “The Role of Televised Debates in the Presidential Nomination Process.” In *In Pursuit of the White House 2000*. New York: Chatham House, 2000, 278.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

election debates. In fact, since 1976 every presidential primary cycle has featured at least two debates. These events are highly publicized and routinely draw millions of viewers.<sup>40</sup> Yet, it is unclear how the debate participants were chosen and thus afforded the privilege to speak to these viewers and gain free media coverage.

As debates have become more important, so have debate requirements. Making the debate stage can be key to fundraising and garnering new supporters. Thus, media outlets and parties need to make difficult decisions regarding debate inclusion. Pew's Charitable Trust's "Report of the Task Force on Campaign Reform" sums up the problem:

"Perhaps the most consequential decision that must be made by any debate sponsor is which candidates should be invited to participate. Here, we see a powerful tension between the competing values of inclusiveness and coherence. On one hand, providing access to minor-party and independent candidates may stimulate interest in the campaign and inject new issues and ideas into the debate. That is all good. On the other hand, participation by minor candidates may reduce and fragment the time and attention available to the major candidates, diluting their best opportunity to convey their perspectives and proposals to the electorate."<sup>41</sup>

Before 1972, the primary process was entirely controlled by elites and the party. The Frazier-McGovern reforms democratized the process and rewarded candidates that had run successful campaigns. After the reforms, the elite and the DNC struggled to

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 255.

<sup>41</sup> "New Realities, New Thinking": Report of the Task Force on Campaign Finance Reform. *PS: Political Science and Politics* 30, no. 3 (1997): 487-89.

influence the nomination process. The DNC wanted to prevent the rise of outsider candidates and let the invisible primary do its job. In the primary cycles prior to 2020, it became clear to officials that they could use the primary debates to winnow candidates. After the GOP 2016 primary debate debacle and complaints about media sponsors and candidates during the Democratic primary debates, the DNC decided to create comprehensive debate qualification. The DNC could reassert its influence and winnow the field with its own rules while appearing to remain impartial.

#### Debates from 1956-1976

The first Democratic primary debate took place in 1956 between Estes Kefauver and Adlai Stevenson. During the 1960, 1968, 1972 and 1976 cycles there were a total of ten primary debates and each debate had an average of 3.2 candidates on the stage. The primaries and primary debates themselves were not determinative of the overall result. During the 1950s, William Carleton notes that an “astute politician [could] reach the presidency merely by the quiet search for delegates and the lining up of congress local leaders and bosses.”<sup>42</sup> This was the era of the smoke-filled conference room where Democratic congressional leaders would meet to decide their party’s nominee. While the debates contributed to voters’ assessment of the candidates, it played almost no role in determining the eventual nominee.

The Frazier-McGovern reforms, instituted in 1971, forced party elite to accept the nomination of those that had run successful national pre-convention campaigns.<sup>43</sup> The reforms occurred after what Cohen calls “the outrageous nomination of Herbert Humphrey.”<sup>44</sup> Humphrey

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<sup>42</sup> Carleton, William G. “The Revolution in the Presidential Nominating Convention.” *Political Science Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (1957): 227.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Cohen, 3.

did not participate in any of the primary debates and did not run on the ballot in any of the ten primary states. The Democratic president, Lyndon Johnson, did not want George McGovern or Eugene McCarthy, the two candidates on the ballot, to win the nomination because they were against the Vietnam War. Instead, a pro-war Humphrey won the nomination at the convention by garnering support from party bosses.<sup>45</sup> The Frazier-McGovern reforms were agreed to by the DNC after the nomination. The rules took power away from the political elite and ensured that party bosses could not hand-pick nominees. The reforms required states to hold primary elections to select which delegates would be sent to the party convention. Each state was allocated delegates based on their state's population. The reforms made campaigns and winning primary elections more important.

#### Primary Debate Qualification 1984-2004

The Democratic primary debate qualifications continued to be unimportant from 1984 to 2004. The number of established candidates vying for their party's nomination in each cycle in this period was under ten. There was no need for a multi-night debate, nor strict debate requirements.

In 1984, the Democratic party decided to increase the number of primary debates from three to ten. The first debate was held that year in Hanover, New Hampshire and included eight candidates. This was the most candidates the Democrats would have on one debate stage until the first debate in 2004. The first debate in 1984 occurred just days before the New Hampshire primary. At the time, the debates did not play a role in the winnowing process because none of the candidates were excluded from the stage. Instead, candidates dropped out after they fell

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 5.

behind in the delegate count. By the seventh debate, which occurred after Super Tuesday, there were only three candidates left on the stage. In 1984, the winnowing on the debate stage occurred after the candidates began to lose delegates, not because they were excluded from the debate. Thus, candidate qualifications for the debates during the 1984 primary were not significant.

The Democratic debate qualifications in 1988, 1992 and 2000 were also not critical and did not impact the winnowing process. There was a total of 37 debates between these three primary cycles and each debate had an average of 3.8 candidates. In 1988, the debate schedule was moved forward. Instead of starting in January of the election year, it started in August of the year before. Nevertheless, the original seven candidates participated in most of the debates until Super Tuesday. After Super Tuesday, the number of candidates dropped to three. Like 1984, most of the candidates waited until after Super Tuesday to drop out of the race based on their delegate count. Again, failing to meet debate qualifications does not appear to contribute to dropping out of the race. In 1992 and 2000, the same phenomenon is apparent. The 1992 primary cycle had six candidates on the stage after New Hampshire. After Super Tuesday, the field winnowed to three. In 2000, there were only two candidates on the debate stage, Senator Bill Bradley of New Jersey and former Vice President Al Gore of Tennessee. During this primary cycle neither candidate dropped out prior to the convention. It is clear from these historical examples that losing state primary elections was the determining factor in dropping out of the race not participation in the debates. During this period, debate qualification did not play a role in the nomination process.

## 2004 Debates

The 2004 Democratic debates featured an unprecedented number of candidates. The first debate in September 2003 included nine candidates, including Vermont governor Howard Dean, North Carolina Senator John Edwards, House minority leader Richard Gephardt, Florida Senator Bob Graham, Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, Ohio Representative Dennis Kucinich, Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman, Illinois Senator Carol Mosely-Braun and the Reverend Al Sharpton. Again, the debate requirements were not impactful in the winnowing of the candidates. Seven candidates were on the debate stage before the New Hampshire and South Carolina primaries. By Super-Tuesday on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, there were only four candidates left. The debate requirements in this campaign did not exclude candidates, rather candidates were dropping out on their own after they failed to accumulate delegates.

There was another factor at play in the winnowing process during the 2004 debates: front-loading. In the 2004 primaries, the DNC and state parties decided to schedule all the primaries within several weeks of each other.<sup>46</sup> Previously, candidates had several weeks between primaries, allowing them time to campaign in each state. In 2004, it was difficult for candidates to effectively communicate their positions to voters in many states. In addition, the candidates were forced to be strategic with their limited funds and were unable to campaign widely or advertise effectively in each state. The DNC justified the front-loaded schedule by claiming “the most important part of any primary schedule is that it needs to identify a strong Democratic nominee early and lead to a Democratic victory in the general.”<sup>47</sup> Busch and Mayer find the schedule put pressure on non-front runners by making it difficult to retain a reliable flow

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<sup>46</sup> Busch, Andrew, and William Mayer. “The Front-Loading Problem.” In *The Making of the Presidential Candidates 2004*. New York: Rowan & Littlefield, 2004, 33.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

of campaign funds.<sup>48</sup> Second, they conclude the schedule increased the organizational demands on non-front runner candidates. The changes pushed six out of nine candidates out of the race by mid-February. Here, the debates did not put pressure on candidates, but rather the primary schedule did.

#### 2008 Debates: Debate Requirements Matter

In the 2008 Democratic primary cycle, the debate qualifications became more important in the winnowing process. This cycle featured an unprecedented 20 debates, four more than 2004. There were eight candidates on the stage in Orangeburg, South Carolina for the first debate in April of 2007. In December, there were six candidates and after the New Hampshire primary there were only four candidates. Unlike previous years, two semi-major candidates, Dennis Kucinich and Mike Gravel, were excluded from the debates prior to the first caucus in Iowa because of differing debate qualifications imposed by media outlets in New Hampshire and Nevada. The debates qualifications played a significant role in winnowing the field. Moreover, it was not the DNC excluding the candidates, but rather the media outlets that arranged the debates. The exclusion of the two candidates and the media's role in the debates represents a dramatic shift in the primary debate system.

Starting in September of 2007, six months before Iowa, media outlets were trying to exclude Dennis Kucinich from participating in the Democratic debates. Kucinich was the Mayor of Cleveland and a former congressman from Ohio. He ran for the Democratic nomination in 2004 and dropped out in March. While he was included in all the debates during the 2004 cycle, he frequently criticized the news media for not covering him. He condemned ABC News for

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 26.

removing a reporter that was following his campaign. ABC responded by claiming they were focusing more viable candidates.<sup>49</sup> A similar trend followed his candidacy in 2008.

Early in the 2008 nomination process, media outlets sought to exclude the former congressman. In an unsanctioned debate hosted by AARP in New Hampshire on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2007, Kucinich was excluded for not meeting the debate requirements. AARP claimed that he had not met their debate standard by failing to have an “Iowa campaign office and the employment of an Iowa campaign staff representative by no later than August 1, 2007.”<sup>50</sup> Kucinich had an office in the state, but it was run out of a friend’s house and did not meet AARP’s requirements.<sup>51</sup> The same requirements were used for the Des Moines Register debate on December 13<sup>th</sup>. Again, Kucinich was excluded because the organizers concluded “that a person working out of his home did not meet our criteria for a campaign office and full-time paid staff in Iowa.”<sup>52</sup> In another debate, ABC News decided to exclude him “because [he] did not place first through fourth in Iowa, poll 5 percent or higher in one of the last four major New Hampshire surveys, or poll 5 percent or higher in one of the last four major national surveys.”<sup>53</sup> Although these debates were weeks before the first caucus in Iowa, media outlets were attempting to exclude Kucinich.

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<sup>49</sup> Robison, Josh, and Lorna Tychostup. “How the Media Picks Candidates.” *Z Magazine*. 03 Jan. 2007. 1 Dec. 2006. *Internet Archive*. <<https://web.archive.org/web/20070103230928/http://zmagsite.zmag.org/Feb2004/tychostup0204.html>>.

<sup>50</sup> Getler, Michael. “Debates Are On; Debaters Are Off.” PBS. Public Broadcasting Service, September 20, 2007. [https://www.pbs.org/ombudsman/2007/09/debates\\_are\\_on\\_debaters\\_are\\_off.html](https://www.pbs.org/ombudsman/2007/09/debates_are_on_debaters_are_off.html).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Marre, Klaus. “Kucinich Booted from Iowa Debate.” *The Hill*, December 12, 2007. <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/902-kucinich-booted-from-iowa-debate>.

<sup>53</sup> Gough, Paul J. “ABC Sees 2 Sides to New Hampshire Debate.” *Reuters*. Thomson Reuters, November 26, 2007. <https://www.reuters.com/article/television-debates-dc/abc-sees-2-sides-to-new-hampshire-debate-idUSN2643539320071126>.



The last straw for Dennis Kucinich was being disinvited from the NBC Las Vegas debate on January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2008. NBC changed the requirements to prevent him from appearing. At first, he was included in the debate because he had averaged three to four percent support in recent Nevada polls.<sup>54</sup> NBC changed the criteria to include only candidates who had placed first, second or third in either the Iowa caucuses or New Hampshire primaries.<sup>55</sup> He sued NBC in Nevada claiming that NBC was infringing on his first amendment right to free speech. He complained that NBC was attempting to muzzle a “candidate who has duly qualified to participate in the political process in violation of the prior offer to allow the participation.”<sup>56</sup> To his chagrin, the Supreme Court of Nevada ruled against him. His campaign failed to meet the standard of irreparable harm. The court ruled that NBC is a private company and there was no contract that guaranteed Kucinich’s participation. Kucinich’s exclusion from the debates before and after the first primaries demonstrate the media’s attempt to control the nomination process. After missing the next four debates and failing to accumulate delegates or funding, Kucinich dropped out of the race. He was not the only the candidate during the 2004 Democratic primaries to be excluded from debates before Iowa.

Mike Gravel was also excluded from debates before the first primary. Gravel is a former Senator from Alaska and is famous for reading the *Pentagon Papers* on the floor of the Senate in 1971. Media outlets first tried to exclude Gravel from the debate stage in July 2007, four months before Iowa. CNN and YouTube, the debate organizers, claimed that their “criteria simply identifies candidates that have measurable public support for their campaign. Because Mike

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<sup>54</sup> Stelter, Brian. “NBC Wins Battle Over Debate.” The New York Times. The New York Times, January 16, 2008. <https://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/15/nbc-wins-battle-over-debate/>.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

Gravel has not demonstrated measurable public support for his campaign to date, he has not received an invitation.”<sup>57</sup> After complaining about the decision, Gravel participated in the eight candidate CNN debate. On August 7<sup>th</sup>, Gravel was yet again excluded from a debate for not filling out a questionnaire that the host, AFL-CIO, required.<sup>58</sup> On August, 9<sup>th</sup>, Gravel was not invited to the LGBT Network debate because he failed to meet the \$100,000 fundraising threshold.<sup>59</sup> After arguing against the unfair requirement, claiming it limited free speech, they allowed him to participate.<sup>60</sup> The LGBT Network’s requirement marks the first time that fundraising was used as a debate requirement for Democratic candidates. On October 30<sup>th</sup>, Gravel was excluded from an NBC debate because he had not “campaigned in New Hampshire and/or Iowa at least 14 times in the past year, did not poll high enough in national polls and had not raised more than US\$1 million.”<sup>61</sup> Upon this news, a hedge fund manager famously donated \$1 million to Gravel’s campaign.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, he was not included. Gravel left the Democratic party in March of 2008 to run for the nomination as a Libertarian.

The campaigns of Gravel and Kucinich demonstrate the power of the media and the importance of consistent debate qualifications. Both candidates were excluded from debates. They argued against the decisions, understanding the importance of debates in creating campaign

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<sup>57</sup> Haley, Jeff. “Gravel Dismisses CNN, WMUR-TV And Union Leader Statement.” CNN. 21 Mar. 2007. Internet Archive. <  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20071227034815/http://www.gravel2008.us/?q=node%2F471>>.

<sup>58</sup> “Organized Labor and the 2008 Presidential Primary Campaign.” Eric M. Appleman/Democracy in Action. <http://p2008.org/interestg08/labor08.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Belonsky, Andrew. “Gravel Pissed Over HRC Diss.” Queerty. Queerty, July 11, 2007. <https://www.queerty.com/gravel-pissed-over-hrc-diss-20070711>.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> “Gravel Supporter Putting Money Where Mouth Is.” Boston Globe, October 27, 2007. [http://www.boston.com/news/local/new\\_hampshire/articles/2007/10/27/gravel\\_supporter\\_putting\\_money\\_where\\_mouth\\_is/](http://www.boston.com/news/local/new_hampshire/articles/2007/10/27/gravel_supporter_putting_money_where_mouth_is/)

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

momentum. Moreover, the inconsistent and seemingly arbitrary requirements of 2008 were a signal to the Democratic party that changes needed to be made. The media had demonstrated it had too much control over the process and the party realized it had too little. These 2008 debate qualifications troubles compounded with the GOP's chaotic debate stages in 2016, made it clear to senior DNC officials that they needed to make a change.

#### 2008, 2012 and 2016 Debates: A Lesson from the GOP

The 2008 GOP primary debates were equally as inconsistent as those of the Democrats in 2008. The GOP had 20 debates from May 2007 to February 2008. In *Intraparty Democracy and the 2016 Election*, Julia Azari and Seth Masket find only three instances during that time in which the debate requirements were clearly enumerated. The second debate, which occurred in May, required a threshold of one percent in South Carolina and national polls.<sup>63</sup> A businessman, named John Cox, sued Fox Broadcasting Network for excluding him from the debate. A judge later ruled that free speech rights did not apply because a primary debate is not a public forum.<sup>64</sup> This was the same argument used by the Supreme Court of Nevada to exclude Kucinich. Ron Paul, a Texas congressmen, was also excluded from a Fox News debate before the New Hampshire primary. Paul performed well in Iowa and his campaign had succeeded in its fundraising efforts.<sup>65</sup> With the respect to the 2008 GOP debates, Azari and Masket found that

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<sup>63</sup> Azari, Julia, and Seth Masket. "Intraparty Democracy and the 2016 Election." In *Conventional Wisdom, Parties and Broken Barriers in the 2016 Election*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018., 146.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Falcone, Michael. "Ron Paul Makes an Appeal for Third-Party Candidates." The New York Times. The New York Times, September 9, 2008. <https://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/09/09/ron-paul-makes-an-appeal-for-third-party-candidates/>.

“the networks appear[ed] to have cherry-picked the polls it used, crafting criteria to exclude specific candidates.”<sup>66</sup>

In 2012, the GOP attempted to reconcile the errors they made in 2008. Media outlets created clearer standards for their debates. They included specific lists of polls that could be used to qualify for debate inclusion.<sup>67</sup> The GOP had nine candidates that made at least one of the debates. Further, aside from Mitt Romney’s exclusion from the first debate and Jon Huntsman’s exclusion from the second debate, the debate requirements were not a meaningful issue of the primaries. While the 2012 debates were less contentious than 2008, 2016 would bring its own host of problems.

The 2016 GOP primary debates were unlike any other in the country’s history. Expecting many candidates, the GOP created a commission called the Growth and Opportunity Project that was tasked with creating unilateral rules to govern the party’s primary debates.<sup>68</sup> The commission limited the number of party-sanctioned debates and prescribed the location of the debates. The commission, however, did not establish rules for polling thresholds, leaving the networks in charge of who could participate. Media outlets took it upon themselves to establish more consistent debate qualifications. Since the GOP primaries had 21 candidates and twelve debates, media outlets and the party wanted to create a fair process for debate invitations. The GOP and their media partners accomplished this in two ways. First, the party featured undercard-debates for those who did not make the primetime debate stage. This gave lower-polling longshot candidates the opportunity to present their ideas. Second, media outlets independently created comprehensive rules for debate requirements. Due to the increased size of the field and

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<sup>66</sup> Azari, 146.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 156.

the GOP's intervention in the process, the 2016 GOP debates were the most procedurally developed and consistent in primary history.<sup>69</sup>

Although the debate rules were consistent, the crowded field hurt the GOP's ability to control the outcome of the nomination. The invisible primary failed to produce an establishment candidate. The top candidates in the early summer, which included Cruz, Bush, Kasich, Rubio and Carson, had a similar number of endorsements and had accumulated comparable funds.<sup>70</sup> The large field and lack of a clear establishment candidate worked in Donald Trump's favor. The first debate on August 6<sup>th</sup> featured two debates with a total of 20 candidates. The first included the ten highest polling candidates, in order of their national polling averages.<sup>71</sup> The under-card debate originally had a 1% polling threshold that was later removed to allow three additional candidates. In the September debate, a lack of polling allowed additional candidates to compete in the under-card debate.<sup>72</sup> A week before the first primary, the GOP was still using a two-debate format featuring the eleven candidates in the race. After Iowa, the number of candidates allowed on the primetime stage was reduced to seven.<sup>73</sup> Regardless, the damage was done. Candidates stayed in the race longer because they were making the debate stage in only the under-card stage. Only half of the 20 original candidates dropped out before the Iowa caucuses. Although the GOP

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 156.

<sup>70</sup> "The 2016 Endorsement Primary." FiveThirtyEight, June 7, 2016. <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2016-endorsement-primary/#endorsements>.

<sup>71</sup> Allen, Mike, and Adam B. Lerner. "Fox Lowers Threshold for Early Debate." POLITICO, July 30, 2015. <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/07/fox-republican-debate-lowers-threshold-120748>.

<sup>72</sup> Preston, Mark. "CNN Amends GOP Presidential Debate Criteria - CNNPolitics." CNN. Cable News Network, September 2, 2015. <https://www.cnn.com/2015/09/01/politics/cnn-debate-criteria-amendment/>.

<sup>73</sup> "ABC News Announces Criteria For New Hampshire Republican Debate." ABC News. ABC News Network. Accessed March 2, 2020. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/abc-news-announces-criteria-hampshire-republican-debate/story?id=36550263>.

had created a consistent and developed debate process, an outsider still became the party nominee. The large debate stage and Trump's rise in the polls allowed him to qualify for the debates and spread his message.

In 2016, the debates were chaotic and resulted in the opposite of what the GOP establishment wanted. The political elite did not want Trump to be their party's nominee and believed he could not win. In *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America*, John Sides, Lynn Vavreck, and Michael Tessler assess the media's role in Trump's nomination. They found that Trump's constant media presence and attention-grabbing debate performances made up for his organizational short-falls.<sup>74</sup> He received more media coverage than the other candidates and did not pay a cent for it. The Democrats learned from this experience. They wanted a consistent system like the GOP debates, but without an extremist candidate on the ticket.

### 2016 Democratic Debates

The 2016 Democratic primary was the opposite of the GOP experience. The primaries only contained a handful of candidates and featured a clear establishment candidate in Hillary Clinton. Not only was she arguably the most experienced candidate to ever run for the position, but also had a plethora of endorsements and a massive war chest. She won the invisible primary. In addition, she benefitted from the support of super delegates, who represented 15% of the total delegates at the convention.<sup>75</sup> It was Hillary Clinton's nomination to lose in 2016.

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<sup>74</sup> Sides, John, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck. *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America*. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018.

<sup>75</sup> Barnes, James, and Jerrick Adams. "2016 Presidential Nominations: Calendar and Delegate Rules." Ballotpedia.

Nonetheless, she faced four other candidates in the first debate, including Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley, Virginia Senator Jim Webb and Rhode Island Governor Lincoln Chafee. The Democratic debates originally only featured six debates, minimizing the likelihood a non-establishment candidate would have a breakout debate performance. The first debate in October hosted by CNN required candidates to have 1% or more support in three or more national polls.<sup>76</sup> Lawrence Lessig, a law professor at Harvard, running for President was not invited to any of the debates for failing to register any support. Many saw his candidacy as perfunctory and considered his absence as uncontroversial.<sup>77</sup> By the next debate in November, Chafee and Webb had both dropped out. Both of their campaigns failed to accumulate momentum. Martin O'Malley, the former Governor of Maryland, was almost left off the fourth debate in January for failing to reach 5% nationally.<sup>78</sup> He complained that "this election is not up to NBC executives, not up to pollsters, its up to you, the people of Iowa."<sup>79</sup> He was later allowed on the debate stage after the chair of the party intervened on Twitter, writing she expected to see all the candidates on the stage.<sup>80</sup> After New Hampshire, O'Malley dropped out leaving two candidates, Clinton and Sanders. The party also effectively got rid of

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[https://ballotpedia.org/2016\\_presidential\\_nominations:\\_calendar\\_and\\_delegate\\_rules](https://ballotpedia.org/2016_presidential_nominations:_calendar_and_delegate_rules).

<sup>76</sup> "Candidate Criteria for the October 13, 2015 CNN-Facebook Democratic Presidential Primary Debate." Turner Broadcasting, October 13, 2015.

<http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2015/images/09/28/final-democratic-criteria-2016.pdf>.

<sup>77</sup> Frizell, Sam. "Lawrence Lessig Would Not Have Qualified for CBS Debate." Time, November 5, 2015. <https://time.com/4102049/democratic-debate-cbs-lawrence-lessig/>

<sup>78</sup> Masonhall, Erika. "Qualifying Criteria for NBC NBC-YOUTUBE Democratic Candidates Debates." NBCNews. NBCUniversal News Group, January 8, 2016. <http://press.nbcnews.com/2016/01/08/qualifying-criteria-for-nbc-news-youtube-democratic-candidates-debate/>.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Jackson, David. "New NBC Debate Criteria Could Pose Problems for O'Malley." USA Today. Gannett Satellite Information Network, January 11, 2016. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2016/01/08/nbc-democratic-debate-criteria-clinton-sanders-omalley/78502784/>.

unsanctioned debates by refusing to give delegates to candidates that participated in them.<sup>81</sup> This ensured that candidate would comply with the party's rules. While the debate rules were consistent throughout the process, the DNC's role in the primary process became a point of contention.

The 2016 primaries left the Sanders campaign fuming. Although Hillary Clinton won the nomination on the first ballot, accumulating 54% of the total pledged delegates, Sanders alleged the DNC was working against him.<sup>82</sup> First, his campaign complained that the lack of debates prevented Sanders from getting his name out. The DNC added three more debates after Senator Sanders became more relevant and complained. There were five debates that featured only Sanders and Clinton. While the GOP had twelve in 2016, the Democrats only had nine. His campaign also complained that the debates were on Saturday nights when people are out or watching sporting events. The GOP debates in 2016 were on weekday nights. Third, they complained about the super delegate rules that supported Clinton.<sup>83</sup> Leaked emails from Debbie Wasserman Shultz, the chair of the DNC, only reinforced Bernie's campaign theories. The emails revealed that Ms. Shultz questioned Sanders' commitment to the party, claiming he speaks like "someone who has never been a member of the Democratic Party and has no understanding of what we do."<sup>84</sup> There is also evidence a Clinton lawyer advised the DNC on

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<sup>81</sup> Gold, Hadas, and Gabriel Debenedetti. "MSNBC, Union Leader Team up for Unsanctioned Democratic Debate." *POLITICO*, January 26, 2016. <https://www.politico.com/blogs/on-media/2016/01/nbc-union-leader-team-up-for-unsanctioned-debate-218249>.

<sup>82</sup> Barnes, James, and Jerrick Adams. "2016 Presidential Nominations: Calendar and Delegate Rules."

<sup>83</sup> Detrow, Scott. "Clinton Campaign Had Additional Signed Agreement with DNC In 2015." *NPR*. *NPR*, November 3, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/2017/11/03/561976645/clinton-campaign-had-additional-signed-agreement-with-dnc-in-2015>.

<sup>84</sup> Blake, Aaron. "Here Are the Latest, Most Damaging Things in the DNC's Leaked Emails." *The Washington Post*. *WP Company*, July 25, 2016.



how to deal with Sanders and created a narrative that Sanders never had an organized campaign. The complaints against the DNC and leaked emails required them to act to ensure a fairer nomination process for 2020.

### The 2020 Debates

Prior to 2020, the Democratic primary debate qualification rules were inconsistent. The requirements for some debates were set by the media outlet hosting them. In other instances, the DNC intervened, setting their own guidelines. In addition, the requirements varied by debate. In the 2008 cycle, some debates required a candidate to have a campaign staff in early primary voting states to qualify, while other debates relied simply on polling numbers. The inconsistencies frustrated candidates that were left off the stage, many of whom argued the rules were unclear and harmed their candidacy. In February of 2019, the DNC created a unilateral set of rules for its primary debates and made an unprecedented decision to create a new system for debate qualification. In addition to needing a minimum percentage in national and state polls, candidates were incentivized to raise money from as many Americans as possible. I hypothesize that these prior inconsistencies pushed the Democrats to create comprehensive debate requirements. Moreover, I believe the decision allows the party to create rules that work in their favor rather than in the favor of media outlets.

By taking the debate threshold out of the hands of media outlets, and setting them for themselves, the DNC works to reassert its power in the process. The requirements, which are the strictest in primary debate history, were created with the intent to winnow the field quickly. The

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<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/07/24/here-are-the-latest-most-damaging-things-in-the-dncs-leaked-emails/>.

DNC did not want as many under-card debates as the Republicans had in 2016. As such, candidates that failed to meet the progressively strict requirements will be forced to drop out of the race. Not making the debate makes it harder for candidates to raise money and garner media attention. The strict debate requirements also make it difficult for long-shot candidates to gain momentum. This further ensures that an establishment candidate will win the party's nominee.

### Background on the 2020 Decision

In 2017, Tom Perez was elected by the senior members of the DNC, in part to lead the nomination process. His qualifications were impressive, serving as the Secretary of Labor and Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights under President Obama. Perez outlined his party's goals for the 2020 presidential election. Perez made it a priority to improve the debate structure of his party. In a press release, Perez announced his goals, stating that he wanted to “give the grassroots a bigger voice than ever before; showcase [Democratic] candidates on an array of media platforms; present an opportunity for vigorous discussion about issues, ideas and solutions; and reach as many potential voters as possible.”<sup>85</sup> In addition, Perez wanted a nomination process that could handle a large primary field and winnow it quickly. He noted that he was not a fan of under-card debates and wanted a discussion of substantive issues instead of “debates about hand-size,” referring to the 2016 GOP primary debates.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> “DNC Announces Details for The First Two Presidential Primary Debates,” Democrats, February 14, 2019, <https://democrats.org/news/dnc-announces-details-for-the-first-two-presidential-primary-debates/>

<sup>86</sup> Thompson, Alex. “Perez Nixes 'Undercard' Debates for 2020 Primary.” POLITICO, December 20, 2018. <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/12/20/dnc-2020-democrats-debate-1071031>.

Perez had a little over a year to create rules that aligned with his agenda. Media reports claim that DNC officials created a committee that met 80 to 100 times to discuss the debate structure.<sup>87</sup> The most difficult decision was how to create new debate qualifying requirements. Several options were presented. They could use the minimum polling percentage they had used in 2016. Second, they considered requiring candidates to have a certain number of paid staffers in early primary states. Third, they considered adding a fundraising component and requiring candidates to raise a minimum amount of money or have a minimum number of donors. They spoke with former candidates and campaign managers and conducted research to make their decision.<sup>88</sup> The criteria were announced in February 2019:

Democratic candidates may qualify for the first and second debate by meeting one of the two following sets of criteria:

Polling Method: Register 1% or more support in three polls (which may be national polls, or polls in Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, and/or Nevada) publicly released between January 1, 2019, and 14 days prior to the date of the Organization Debate... Any candidate's three qualifying polls must be conducted by different organizations, or if by the same organization, must be in different geographical areas.

Grassroots Fundraising Method. Candidates may qualify for the debate by demonstrating that the campaign has received donations from at least (1)

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<sup>87</sup> Russell Berman, "The DNC Isn't Apologizing for Its Debate Rules," *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, June 13, 2019), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/06/democratic-debate-rules/591550/>

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

65,000 unique donors; and (2) a minimum of 200 unique donors per state in at least 20 U.S. states. To demonstrate that the fundraising threshold has been reached, candidates must provide verifiable evidence, which they may do by authorizing ActBlue and/or NGP VAN to provide that evidence.

If more than 20 candidates qualify for the debate, the top 20 candidates will be selected using a methodology that gives primacy to candidates meeting both thresholds, followed by the highest polling average, followed by the most unique donors.<sup>89</sup>

In May 2019, the DNC announced they were going to use similar criteria for the third and fourth debates. The polling requirement was increased to 2% and the grassroots fundraising threshold increased to 130,000 donors with at least 400 unique donors in at least twenty states.<sup>90</sup> In September, the DNC announced a change to the polling requirements for the fifth and sixth debates. Candidates needed either four polls above 4% or two polls above 5% in early states.<sup>91</sup> The DNC wanted to incentivize candidates to focus on early states. In addition, the grassroots fundraising threshold increased to 165,000 donors and 600 unique donors in at least 20 states.<sup>92</sup> The seventh debate further increased the standards for polling and fundraising.<sup>93</sup> The eighth debate rules are like the seventh, except for the added provision that all candidates that gain one

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<sup>89</sup> “DNC Announces Details for The First Two Presidential Primary Debates”

<sup>90</sup> “DNC Announces Details for Third Presidential Primary Debate,” Democrats, May 29, 2019, <https://democrats.org/news/third-debate/>

<sup>91</sup> “DNC Announces Qualification Criteria for Fifth Presidential Primary Debate,” Democrats, September 23, 2019, <https://democrats.org/news/dnc-announces-qualification-criteria-for-fifth-presidential-primary-debate/>

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> “DNC Announces Details for Seventh Democratic Presidential Primary Debate.” Democrats, December 20, 2019. <https://democrats.org/news/dnc-announces-details-for-seventh-democratic-presidential-primary-debate/>.

pledged delegate in the Iowa caucus automatically qualify.<sup>94</sup> Delegates in Iowa are only awarded to candidates that garner more than 15% of the final vote. The ninth and tenth debates are similar to the eighth, but remove the fundraising threshold.<sup>95</sup> Finally, the eleventh debate requires candidates to have at least 20% of the pledged delegates awarded by March 15<sup>th</sup> to qualify.<sup>96</sup> The DNC has not yet announced the rules for a possible twelfth debate.

The number of donors was decided in consultation with ActBlue. ActBlue is campaign fundraising website that makes it easy for people to donate to their candidate of choice. The site keeps a donor's disclosure documents and credit card on file. The DNC decided the number of donors by working with the site and consultants who analyzed historical donor trends from the 2016 election and FEC disclosures from Congressional elections. Those that made the decisions asserted that it was the best way to meet their grassroots goal. Tom Perez believes that "if you want to be president of the United States, you have to develop a proficiency at grassroots fundraising."<sup>97</sup> Thus, he dubbed it the grassroots fundraising threshold. It incentivizes campaigns to build their fundraising infrastructure. A candidate that is not necessarily polling well early, but is developing their fundraising techniques will benefit from the donor requirement. Moreover, Perez hopes that it will help the DNC in the general election. This large base of donors may not only donate in the general election, but also may volunteer or participate in other ways to support

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<sup>94</sup> "DNC Announces Qualification Criteria for New Hampshire Democratic Presidential Primary Debate." Democrats, January 17, 2020. <https://democrats.org/news/dnc-announces-qualification-criteria-for-new-hampshire-democratic-presidential-primary-debate/>.

<sup>95</sup> "DNC Announces Qualification Criteria for Nevada Democratic Presidential Primary Debate." Democrats, February 3, 2020. <https://democrats.org/news/dnc-announces-qualification-criteria-for-nevada-democratic-presidential-primary-debate/>.

<sup>96</sup> "DNC Announces Qualification Criteria For Arizona Democratic Presidential Primary Debate." Democrats, March 9, 2020. <https://democrats.org/news/dnc-announces-qualification-criteria-for-arizona-democratic-presidential-primary-debate/>.

<sup>97</sup> "DNC Announces Details for Third Presidential Primary Debate"

the Democrats. By encouraging donations of any size, Perez wanted to encourage as many people as possible to participate in politics.

After the decision was made there was pushback from campaigns and pundits. Michael Bennett, who qualified for the first two debates and failed to qualify for the subsequent three debates, believes the DNC has mixed priorities. The DNC should not “be favoring national fundraising and cable television over the early states like New Hampshire.”<sup>98</sup> A senior Democrat campaign advisor shares Bennett’s view. It forces candidates to choose “between focusing on Iowa or New Hampshire or focusing on making these national requirements.”<sup>99</sup> These comments were made before the early state polling criteria for debate five and six. Some have also complained about the lack of transparency in the process. They argue that the new criteria were released without consulting candidates or middle to lower level DNC officials. The resistance to the change prompted the need for a thorough analysis on the decision to include strict requirements.

The debate requirements announced by the DNC for 2020 were the result of several conflicting incentives. First, the Democrats did not want ten candidates going into Iowa. The DNC, under the direction of Tom Perez, wanted to sufficiently winnow the field before the first primary. Less candidates translates into a shorter primary season and an increased focus on the general. He also wanted to avoid a repeat of the GOP’s process where a long-shot candidate was nominated as Trump had been in 2016. He expected a big primary field for 2020 with candidates looking to raise their profile and defeat a widely unpopular incumbent. He wanted a barrier to

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<sup>98</sup> Max Greenwood, “Tougher Debate Threshold Sets off Scramble among 2020 Democrats,” *The Hill* (*The Hill*, June 8, 2019), <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/447500-tougher-debate-threshold-sets-off-scramble-among-2020-democrats>

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

entry that “was not a layup, but also not a half-court shot.”<sup>100</sup> Second, he wanted to prevent any suspicion that the party favored one candidate over another. The DNC needed to respond to the previous complaints from O’Malley and Sanders. The party wanted candidates to believe it had taken its foot off the scale with consistent qualification thresholds set by the party, not independent media outlets. Only the DNC could control this vital responsibility. The DNC had to weigh its internal desire to control the outcome of the process, while appearing to be impartial. The untested 2020 requirements were created to remedy these conflicting interests.

## **Discussion**

Hypothesis One: The DNC changed the criteria to combat the rise in the number of candidates

The increasing number of candidates in modern primaries particularly the GOP’s 2016 primary is one reason why the Democrats instituted strict debate rules for 2020. There were a total of twenty-nine major Democratic presidential candidates vying for their party’s nomination in 2020, eight more than the GOP in 2016. The unprecedented number of candidates required a comprehensive system for winnowing. Thus, the DNC turned to debate rules. Those that failed to make the debate stage were likely to experience a drop in poll numbers and poor fundraising causing them to end their candidacy. The stricter requirements would also speed up the winnowing process, forcing voters to choose from a handful of candidates as opposed to over twenty-five.

In the history of Democratic presidential debates, the largest number of candidates that had appeared on a debate stage was ten in 2004. Still, the 2004 primaries did not host an

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<sup>100</sup> Berman, Russell. “The DNC Isn’t Apologizing for Its Debate Rules.” The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, June 13, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/06/democratic-debate-rules/591550/>.

undercard debate. In addition, the Democrats and media outlets have allowed most major candidates, with some exceptions in 2008, to compete in the debates up until the first primary. In 2008, Gravel and Kucinich were excluded from early debates because they failed to meet some aspects of the debate requirements. While some of the rules seemed arbitrary, their campaigns failed to gain traction. Both were outsider candidates that lacked formal campaign organizations in many early primary states. The 2020 campaign was a new test for Democrats. They could no longer rely on media outlets and candidates voluntarily dropping out to winnow the field. Instead, they decided to use debate requirements.

In anticipation of more candidates in 2020 than 2016, the DNC announced the rule changes in February, before most candidates had officially announced their candidacy. Potential Democratic candidates had three major incentives to run in 2020. First, there was no clear favorite in the race as there was in 2016, despite Vice President Joe Biden's, Senator Corey Booker's and Senator Bernie Sanders' early endorsements and fundraising. Second, as more candidates entered the race, a candidate on the edge became more likely to run. With twenty candidates already in the race, the so-called marginal candidate had little to lose by joining the race. Third, all the Democratic candidates believed that they could beat Trump. Since Hillary Clinton, an establishment candidate lost in 2016, many non-establishment candidates joined the race to offer an alternative. Their campaigns appealed to voters by claiming Democrats needed a new approach to beating Trump. The confluence of these factors meant that the DNC knew they were going to see more candidates in 2020 and needed a method for quickly winnowing the field.

The stricter debate rules change forced candidates to continually reassess their campaigns long-term viability. Even before the first primary, candidates face decisions on whether to



remain in the race. Prior to the rule change in 2020, low-polling candidates could hope for a breakout debate performance to increase their name recognition and fundraising efforts. This process has sped up and longshot candidates now have a limited number of attempts to have an outstanding debate performance.

Regardless of when a candidate drops out of the race, the decision-making process is the same. Norrander's comprehensive study analyzes presidential primaries from 1980 to 2004. Those dropping out after the first primary are considering initial assets and characteristics (national poll standings, fund-raising totals and occupational background), initial contest outcomes (Iowa and New Hampshire) and structural variables (proportional representation delegate distribution rules, party, front-loaded calendar).<sup>101</sup> Besides the New Hampshire and Iowa results, her duration model predicts that poll standings, occupational background and funding shaped the length of a candidate's bid for the nomination.<sup>102</sup> The long primary season with stricter and stricter debate requirements makes candidates constantly rethink their candidacy. Moreover, without access to debates, candidates face difficulties increasing their polling and fundraising efforts. The new debate thresholds and failure to make the debate stage make it harder for candidates to justify their campaign.

Hypothesis Two: Change in Democratic requirements due to previous inconsistencies

Another reason the DNC changed the debate requirements for 2020 was because they wanted to establish consistent requirements. The inconsistencies in 2008 and 2012 created

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<sup>101</sup> Barbara Norrander, "The Attrition Game: Initial Resources, Initial Contests and the Exit of Candidates During the US Presidential Primary Season," *British Journal of Political Science* 36, no. 3 (2006): pp. 487-507.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

confusion and avenues of attack for candidates that missed the debate thresholds. The Democrats' rules build upon the Republican's attempt in 2016. The Democrats wanted unilateral control over the entire process, to ensure fair and comprehensive debate rules.

Prior to 2008, the Democratic debate requirements were not meant to exclude candidates. Most candidates made the debate stage and dropped out of the race after the first primaries, not after failing to make a debate. In 2008, however, inconsistencies in the debate rules led to multiple complaints. When Gravel and Kucinich were excluded in December of 2007, the two candidates gained media attention for their legal battles and put the party in a difficult position. The party did not want it to appear like they were excluding candidates and stifling the process. However, they also did not want to give a voice to candidates that were unlikely to garner delegates in the primaries and would more likely take attention from the individual who would in fact be the Democratic nominee. Furthermore, at the time it was not the parties making the decisions, but rather media outlets. The 2008 debate cycle was a signal to Democrats that their process needed to be reformed.

In 2016, the Democrats only had six candidates on the first debate stage. Nonetheless, Martin O'Malley complained about being excluded from a debate after the New Hampshire primary. He was later allowed to participate, despite failing to meet the requirements. In the same cycle, the GOP created the most comprehensive rules in their history. The DNC recognized it needed its own comprehensive system to account for the large number of candidates. The Democrats, under the direction of Tom Perez, created the new system for 2020. With the new rules, candidates would no longer be able to complain about lack of clarity or inconsistencies in debate rules.

Hypothesis Three: Democrats want more control over setting rules, taking it away from the media

Before 2020, neither major party had control over who made the primary debate stage. The criteria were set by media outlets and candidates who were excluded channeled their complaints toward the party. Due to the inconsistent rules among the major media outlets, the Democrats needed to intervene. Since the media and the DNC do not have the same incentives regarding primary debate system, the DNC believed it was necessary to take unilateral control.

In the United States, media outlets are run as a for-profit business. Newspapers, cable and online news outlets profit from viewership and advertising revenue. In fact, the revenue of major media outlets is cyclical and rises and falls with election years.<sup>103</sup> For the largest media companies, debates often give them their highest viewership numbers of the year. The first Democratic debate in 2020 had 15.3 million viewers on the first night and 18.1 million viewers on the second night.<sup>104</sup> This beats the previous primary debate record-holder made in 2015. For comparison, the most watched news program in October 2019 was Hannity on Fox News and it had 3.5 million viewers per night.<sup>105</sup>

These primary events are highly publicized and lead the headlines. A debate that creates headlines leads to more views, more expensive advertising slots and subsequently more profit. One journalist notes that “the high [debate] viewership is likely to turbocharge an already

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<sup>103</sup> Berr, Jonathan. “Media Companies Profit Handsomely from the Political Ads Voters Despise.” *Forbes Magazine*, November 2, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jonathanberr/2018/11/02/media-companies-profit-handsomely-from-the-political-ads-voters-despise/#2b2180833828>.

<sup>104</sup> Grynbaum, Michael. “Record Ratings for Democratic Debate as America Tunes In to 2020.” *The New York Times*, June 28, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/28/business/media/democratic-debate-nbc-ratings.html>.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

significant investment in political coverage, which has pushed up revenues and ratings.”<sup>106</sup> Thus, the outlet that has the privilege of holding the debate has an incentive to increase viewership. While the business office of most major media outlets does not explicitly tell their debate staff to create a spectacle, a non-controversial debate is not in their best interest. Controversy is linked to clicks, views and profit. Media outlets must weigh this with their desire to seem like they are impartial. Otherwise, the outlet may lose their ability to host debates in the future and viewers will not consider them trustworthy. In 2013, the GOP announced that it would prohibit CNN and NBC from hosting the Republican 2016 presidential primary debates.<sup>107</sup> The GOP alleged that outlets were “undermining the perceived objectivity of the coverage of the 2016 presidential campaign.”<sup>108</sup> The GOP noted that these two news outlets had a pro-Democrat agenda in the 2012 election, claiming they were trying to appeal to their liberal viewers. Media outlets try to increase viewership and profit, while also trying to stay impartial and maintain the right to host debates.

In addition to trying to increase viewership and appearing impartial, media outlets want to host a meaningful debate to educate potential voters on the candidates. While media outlets want voters to make an informed decision, they must also grapple with the fact that not all candidates are equal. Why should a candidate polling with less than 5% favorability be allowed to participate in a debate with candidates that have 20% favorability? Each media outlet solves this problem differently. CNN reversed its decision to exclude Gravel in July, 2007, although he

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> O’Keefe, Ed. “RNC Votes to Exclude CNN, NBC from 2016 Presidential Primary Debates.” The Washington Post. WP Company, August 16, 2013. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2013/08/16/rnc-to-consider-excluding-cnn-nbc-from-2016-presidential-debates/?arc404=true>.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

did not meet the requirements. In November 2007, CNN added a fundraising component, which excluded him from the debate stage. NBC included all the candidates in their first debate in April 2007. In October, the company excluded Gravel in October for missing the fundraising threshold. The changes in requirements were up to the discretion of the media outlets. Nonetheless, candidates blamed both media companies and the party for failing to include them. Many claimed that they were stifling free speech. To be more even-handed and give clarity to the process, the DNC took unilateral control of the requirements for 2020.

Unlike the major media companies, the DNC is not driven by profit. It does not benefit directly from the advertising revenue generated during debates, nor does it gain financially from high viewership. A highly viewed debate in the eyes of the DNC helps the voters decide on their candidate more quickly and encourages people to become more politically involved. The DNC wants their debates to produce a favorite, educate voters and increase political activism.

Hypothesis Four: Democratic change created to streamline the process hurts long-shot candidates

There is no question that the new debate requirements were created to bring order to the primary process. After the GOP in 2016, senior party officials recognized the need to be more clear in their qualification thresholds. Moreover, the DNC's control allows them to create thresholds that align with meeting their goals. These goals are again to produce an electable candidate and to create a strong organization for the general. The order created by the DNC, however, comes at the cost of long-shot candidates that had previously been in the race until the Iowa caucuses.

Prior to 2020, candidates allocated their resources in a manner that would increase their chances of winning the nomination. Per Paul-Henri Gurian, there are two strategies for resource

allocation in primaries that are determined by the competitiveness of the candidate.<sup>109</sup> Long-shot candidates try to develop momentum by allocating their resources in early primaries, which are expected to be covered extensively by the media. On the other hand, established candidates will focus on garnering the largest number of delegates to secure the nomination. Self-funded candidates are excluded from this discussion because they are not constrained by a limited amount of money.

In 2020, the long-shot candidates have unsurprisingly been the first to be excluded from the debate stage. The DNC only featured two debates with two debate stages. Since the ABC September debate, there have been a maximum of twelve candidates on the stage. The long-shot candidates that have failed to garner material support include Julián Castro, Beto O'Rourke, Tim Ryan, Bill de Blasio, Jay Inslee, Tim Ryan, Joe Sestak, Steve Bullock, John Hickenlooper and Eric Swalwell. These candidates had dropped out of the race by December 2019, a month before the first primary. Many of these candidates explicitly cited the heightened debate requirements in describing their failure to gain momentum. In a fundraising email circulated in September, Beto O'Rourke wrote it would be the "end of [his] campaign" if he did not qualify for the November debate.<sup>110</sup> Similarly, Bill de Blasio told CNN that "it's really tough to conceive of continuing" a campaign without making the October debate.<sup>111</sup> While the debate requirements are not entirely to blame for their failures, they are consistently cited as hurting unlikely candidacies.

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<sup>109</sup> Paul-Henri Gurian, "Resource Allocation Strategies in Presidential Nomination Campaigns," *American Journal of Political Science* 30, no. 4 (1986): p. 802.

<sup>110</sup> Svitek, Patrick. "Key Goal for Texans Julián Castro and Beto O'Rourke in Tuesday's Debate: Make the next One." *The Texas Tribune*, October 15, 2019. <https://www.texastribune.org/2019/10/15/julian-castro-and-beto-orourke-campaigns-need-strong-debate-performanc/>.

<sup>111</sup> Kelly, Caroline. "De Blasio: 'It's Really Tough to Conceive of Continuing' Campaign without Making October Debate." *CNN*. Cable News Network, September 4, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/09/04/politics/bill-de-blasio-campaign-october-debate/index.html>.

The debate criteria rules will fundamentally alter the resource allocation of long-shot candidates both staff wise and financially. Instead of focusing on winning, they must focus on meeting the DNC's strict debate thresholds. This is what led to Senator Gillibrand's outrageous t-shirt promotion on Facebook. Her campaign knew that failing to make the debate stage would be the end of her campaign. She would not be considered viable if she did not make the stage. No longer does failing to acquire delegates in Iowa winnow the field, instead the Democratic debates do.

## **Conclusion**

How do primary debate rules shape the contours of the process? Previous political science literature on the primary process focuses on the role of parties and the elite, typically centering on the invisible primary. Political communication scholars have researched general election debates and the role of media and momentum in primary campaigns. However, there is no existing literature on the importance of primary debate thresholds and the DNC's 2020 criteria.

This thesis provides a contemporary analysis of primary debate requirements and their importance in the nomination process. It outlines the responsibilities and incentives of parties, media outlets and candidates. Furthermore, the historical analysis demonstrates how the debate criteria have changed over time. The increased number of candidates, previous inconsistencies in the requirements and media's control of the debates have created numerous problems for the DNC. More importantly, it made the DNC seem like it was not in control of the process and led to accusations of bias. Thus, the DNC implemented comprehensive requirements for 2020. In doing so, they created rules that would benefit the party and hurt long-shot candidates.

The DNC's new rules on primary debate requirements have a material impact on the candidate selection process. On the one hand, the DNC must try to appease all the candidates and avoid appearing biased toward establishment candidates. On the other hand, the DNC wants to have a smooth process and prevent an unknown outsider candidate from taking over the party, as Trump did to the GOP in 2016. The Democrats needed a mechanism to winnow candidates quickly and prevent the rise of an outsider candidate. The Democrats wanted to appear trustworthy and in-control in the eyes of the American people. The 2020 rules set out to accomplish both goals. When they are attacked for being biased, the DNC has argued that the rules have been in place for months and are consistent. Nonetheless, the rules are significantly stricter than previous years and make it harder for disorganized candidates to make the stage. The DNC is thus shaping the outcome, without appearing to do so.

In 2016, the Democratic party attempted to walk this tight-rope with Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders in 2016. Sanders was the only candidate that could compete with Hillary Clinton for the Democratic nomination. To the surprise of the DNC, his campaign became competitive, relying on grassroots funding and organizing. The DNC did not want a self-identified Democratic Socialist to represent the party. His stances differed staunchly from those in the DNC's party platform, which were agreed to at the party's convention, and more aligned with Clinton's positions. Therefore, the DNC elite agreed to support Clinton at the party's convention in 2016. Nonetheless, the party also did not want to appear to be influencing the process. The days of nominees being chosen by the political elite in smoke-filled conference rooms were over. Emails released by WikiLeaks after the convention have confirmed some of the suspicions of the Sanders campaign regarding the DNC's objectivity. The DNC's embarrassment when the emails were revealed further underscored their need to appear impartial. The 2020 debate rules



attempted to achieve the DNC's objectives in controlling the primary field without appearing to influence it.

While the rules are extremely detailed, they do not address all the DNC's issues. For example, the DNC will continue to rely on media outlets to commission the polls used for polling thresholds. The DNC neither has the resources, nor the desire to invest in the resources to conduct expensive and laborious polls. The 2020 debate requirements list the polling companies that candidates can use to qualify for the debates.<sup>112</sup> Media companies, however, do not only conduct polls for the DNC. They are for-profit companies that issue polls that their company can use on television and report on. This was a problem for Tom Perez in January, 2020 because there were not enough polls commissioned that could help candidates qualify for the DNC debates.<sup>113</sup> Candidates Andrew Yang and Tom Steyer complained that they would not make the debate due to the lack of polls performed between the end of December to early January. In December, a DNC spokeswoman asked the "expansive list of 16 qualifying poll sponsors [to] conduct more independent polling" that could be used as debate criteria.<sup>114</sup> In this case, the DNC is ceding authority to the media as a result of not owning the entire process. This is exactly what the DNC wanted to prevent when they unilaterally created the debate rules without input or alignment with the pollsters or media outlets.

In addition, the DNC never clarified how they would handle candidates that did not conduct any fundraising. Billionaire Tom Steyer spent his own money to meet the DNC's

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<sup>112</sup> "DNC Announces Details for The First Two Presidential Primary Debates"

<sup>113</sup> Epstein, Reid J. "D.N.C. Tells Pollsters to Do More Polls." *The New York Times*, January 3, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/03/us/politics/dnc-debate-polls.html>.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

grassroots funding threshold.<sup>115</sup> On the other hand, billionaire Michael Bloomberg entered the race late, skipped early primaries and refused to spend his money to meet the threshold.<sup>116</sup> Thus, he was excluded from several debates in late January and early February. The DNC got rid of the funding threshold in February and changed the requirements to 10% or higher in four qualifying polls or winning at least one delegate in an early primary state.<sup>117</sup> The party changed the rules because they believed that “now that the grassroots support is actually captured in real voting, the criteria will no longer require a donor threshold.”<sup>118</sup> The rules can change if the party wants them to change. This gives the party flexibility during the primary process to control the debate stage. While Bloomberg qualified for the February 19<sup>th</sup> NBC debate, Yang and Steyer did not.<sup>119</sup> Their exclusion eventually contributed to the end of their respective campaigns. The DNC’s decision to change the criteria in the middle of the process demonstrates their ability to manipulate the process and candidate selection. Despite instituting early clear qualifications for inclusion in debates, the DNC can still bend rules to keep certain candidates off the debate stage and allow others to participate.

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<sup>115</sup> Seitz-Wald, Alex. “New DNC Debate Rules Open Door for Mike Bloomberg to Make Stage.” NBCNews.com. NBC Universal News Group, January 31, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/new-dnc-debate-rules-open-door-mike-bloomberg-make-stage-n1127676>.

<sup>116</sup> Niquette, Mark. “Bloomberg Says He Won’t Accept Contributions to Make the Debates.” Bloomberg.com. Bloomberg, January 30, 2020. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-01-30/bloomberg-says-he-won-t-accept-contributions-to-make-the-debates>.

<sup>117</sup> “DNC Announces Qualification Criteria for Nevada Democratic Presidential Primary Debate”

<sup>118</sup> Seitz-Wald, Alex. “New DNC Debate Rules Open Door for Mike Bloomberg to Make Stage.” NBCNews.com. NBCUniversal News Group, January 31, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/new-dnc-debate-rules-open-door-mike-bloomberg-make-stage-n1127676>.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

The DNC's new debate rules for 2020 also helped the party grow its grassroots connections, which in turn strengthens the party itself. By incentivizing candidates to prioritize donations using the grassroots funding threshold for the debates, the DNC has expanded its network of activists. Tom Perez was chosen to lead the DNC in part due to his experience in this type of organizing. A day before the 2018 midterm elections, Perez met with Robert Siegel from National Public Radio to speak about his priorities as DNC Chair. He asserted that "mobilizing is that sprint up to the election. But [the Democrats] weren't good at organizing. Organizing is the marathon. It's talking to people 12 months a year. It's building relationships with people. And [the Democrats] used to be the best at that."<sup>120</sup> Perez hopes that the threshold requirement will help the DNC in the general election. By encouraging donations of any size, Perez wants to inspire as many people as possible to participate in politics. This large base of donors may not only help fund the general election, but also may encourage people to volunteer or participate in other ways to support the Democrats. In addition, the DNC is requiring campaigns to use ActBlue to collect the donations and to report them to the DNC.<sup>121</sup> The site collects information about donors including their credit card number, address and occupation. The valuable data is stored by the site and can be used by the DNC for future solicitations. This data, now owned by the DNC, strengthens the party by expanding its network and its fundraising capacity. The new

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<sup>120</sup> "All Things Considered," All Things Considered (National Public Radio, November 8, 2017), <https://www.npr.org/2017/11/08/562903167/dnc-chair-tom-perez-on-what-this-years-election-means-for-the-party>

<sup>121</sup> Mitchell, Ben, and Caitlin Huey-Burns. "The Revolution Will Be Online: How Democrats Are Trying to Catch up to Trump." CBS News, June 3, 2019. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-revolution-will-be-online-how-democrats-are-trying-to-catch-up-to-trump/>.

2020 debate rules not only cultivate more donors for the party, but also strengthens the party itself.

Future research on the topic should include on a comprehensive analysis of the 2020 nomination process. Since this paper was written during the 2020 nomination process, it was difficult to include all aspects of the debates. In addition, future research should include interviews with members of each campaign and interviews with DNC officials. These sources could provide more in-depth perspectives on the debate criteria rules and their impact.

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