

The Problem with Donald Trumping

Rodrigo Praino* (March 10, 2016)



Donald trumping all in the Republican race is only possible thanks to an undemocratic system. Disguised in the public eye as the ultimate democratic institution, the primaries actually tend to impose minority decisions, nullify political parties, and ultimately destroy democracy and accountability as we know them. These problems are peculiarly American. They are hardly found in other Western democracies in Europe, Canada or Australia.

Donald Trump continued his winning form in the [Republican presidential primaries](#) [2] on Wednesday. He won primaries in Mississippi and Michigan, and the Hawaii caucus, to go with the swag of states he won on Super Tuesday.

Many people are [surprised](#) [3] and question how Trump's seemingly rapid rise is possible. But it has been in the making for almost half a century. And it provides people around the world with a great opportunity to understand how not to destroy their political system. The problem is not so much Trump; it is the primary system he is masterfully exploiting. Disguised in the public eye as the ultimate democratic institution, the primaries actually use the excuse of democracy to impose minority decisions, nullify political parties and ultimately destroy democracy and accountability as we know them.



How is it possible?

The Republican Party can stop Trump at any time – but it probably won't. State party delegates at a national convention, held between July and August of an election year, officially choose the party's nominee. According to [complicated rules](#) [4], some of these delegates are pledged to vote for a candidate, while others are unpledged and can vote for whomever they want.

Even most pledged delegates, however, are committed to a candidate only during the first ballot. So, [especially](#) [5] if Trump does not secure an absolute majority of delegates (50% plus one) before the convention, anyone could get the nomination.

Having the party step in to bring order in its own house, however, would be seen as anti-democratic. The last time a party blatantly ignored the people's will at a convention was when the Democrats nominated Vice President Hubert Humphrey during the [1968 convention](#) [6].

The Republican establishment makes no secret of their [loathing of Trump](#) [7]. Yet the fear of being dubbed anti-democratic is even stronger than the fear of having Trump [spoil the election](#) [8] as a third-party candidate.

Ultimately, both fears will probably stop the party establishment taking any real action. The irony is that the actual decision on the nominee is hardly an ode to democracy.

Imposing bad, minority decisions

Turnout in American elections is extremely low; the 2012 presidential election attracted 53.6% of the voting-age population to the polls. Turnout in primary elections is even lower – generally between 10% and 25% of the population of each state.

For example, about 5% of the total population of South Carolina voted for Trump in its primary and delivered him all 50 delegates from that state. Then, at the general election, people are stuck with the “democratic” choice of a very influential 5% minority.

The worst part is that, within this system, bad candidates are the norm – not the exception. Since 1972, the Republican Party has always been the party of the establishment. It has an almost set-in-stone informal order of who is next in line for the nomination. Gerald Ford in 1976, Bob Dole in 1996, John McCain in 2008 and Mitt Romney in 2012 were all able to secure the nomination even though their appeal to even just Republican voters was debatable.

The Democratic Party, however, has been full of unconventional candidates hijacking its presidential nomination through primary elections. George McGovern in 1972, Jimmy Carter in 1976, and even Bill Clinton in 1992 and Barack Obama in 2008 were probably not the party establishment's first choice when they got the nomination.

The Trump saga is somewhat different. A non-establishment figure has not truly hijacked the Republican nomination before, but it is just the latest chapter of a long story of bad candidates and bitter surprises.

Nullifying parties



Americans are convinced that primary elections are the culmination of their great democracy. [Many around the world](#) [9] naïvely agree with this statement.

Primaries are the ultimate American invention. Arguably, they are the only American invention in the modern democratic process. Unfortunately, they are a terrible invention – they actually destroy the political system.

Primaries destroy political parties when it comes to their most primitive function: structure the vote and “[bring order out of chaos](#) [10].” Political parties that are not able to select their own candidates end up having no party discipline, losing control over the agenda and – ultimately – having no input on public policy.

The consequences for public policy are enormous. Every policy proposal must be negotiated individually with single politicians; pork barrelling becomes common practice; and there is a complete disconnect between the executive and legislative branches.

Because most American states use primaries not only to (indirectly) select their presidential candidates, but also to (directly) select both parties’ congressional candidates, the issue is spread to both the executive and legislative branches. This is also why President Obama’s [accomplishments](#) [11] were so small, especially for a president originally elected with party majorities in both chambers of Congress.

These problems are peculiarly American. They are hardly found in other Western democracies in Europe, Canada or Australia. Take the latter, for example.

In Australia, political parties carry out all the functions American parties are no longer able to execute. They represent an effective link between the executive and legislative branches. Each party has a set of goals and policy preferences that all of its members publicly pursue as a group. If someone is running for the Liberal Party, voters know what they stand for – regardless of how much information they know about the candidate as an individual.

Australian MPs even resign from parliament to avoid voting against the party line. This would never happen in the US Congress, where party members regularly vote against their own party. American parties could certainly use a large dose of Australian party discipline and control over their own candidates. Australia does not need anyone trumping its political parties.

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