



September 5, 2018

The superdelegates rule makes sense for the Democratic Party

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

The Democrats have maintained their long tradition of scrambling to fix the errors of their most recent presidential nomination process. The Democratic National Committee voted to cut down on the power of the heavily criticized superdelegates and to allow absentee ballots for the caucus voting system. In the past, the cures may have been worse than disease. This time, these fixes may actually work well.

Superdelegates are the Democratic Party officials, as well as the congressmen and governors who have been granted an automatic vote at the convention to nominate the presidential candidate. This group, which makes up between 15 percent and 20 percent of the convention, presented a potential blocking majority against a controversial, albeit popular, nominee. The new rules prevent the superdelegates from voting until the second round. This means they cannot stop a candidate who gains a 50 percent plus one majority in the primary and caucus vote.

In the close 2008 and 2016 elections, the superdelegates played a role in heading off a nomination fight when neither candidate managed to gain an absolute majority of the delegates following the end of the primaries and conventions. In those cases, the superdelegates put the leading candidate over the top. The Democrats came under fire for potentially having this team of unelected delegates decide the nomination.

The superdelegates have been around for 36 years. They were brought into existence in 1982 to both give party leaders some control over the nomination and help avoid a deadlocked convention floor fight. In the last two presidential elections, they actually served this function. Any Democrat with some knowledge of history could see why the party would want to avoid a split convention. The party used to have long and embarrassing battles for the nomination on the floor. This culminated in the weeks long convention in 1924 that took 103 ballots to choose John Davis as the nominee, who promptly was destroyed in the November race. While the Democrats have made many changes to prevent the same problems from occurring again, a deadlocked convention is a constant threat, especially when multiple candidates are running for office.

But the superdelegates, who can play a decisive role in ending a split convention, always represented a potential public relations disaster. In the 2016 election, the dangers of the superdelegates approach came true, as Hillary Clinton had an overwhelming advantage with them. This ended any thought of a convention fight between her and Bernie Sanders. Some Sanders supporters decried the short circuited convention as a farce and claimed that the superdelegates unfairly tipped the scales to Clinton. This, along with other Democratic Party decisions, became a running theme of the Donald Trump campaign, which may have lured some Sanders voters, or at least turned them away from voting for Clinton.

The new rules may walk the fine line here of both ensuring that a candidate who wins an absolute majority of the vote would take the nomination, while at the same time prevent the convention from being hopelessly deadlocked for a long stretch of time. A contested convention is almost certain to lead to bad blood between the sides. While the use of superdelegates in that situation will undoubtedly lead to complaints, there is likely nothing that could be done to stop raw feelings.

However, the superdelegates may prevent an extended battle and attempt to heal the party before the 2020 presidential election. Having the superdelegates around as an effective ultimate decider only after the voters have their say may prove to be a good decision by the Democrats.

Joshua Spivak is a senior fellow with the Hugh Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College in Staten Island in New York.