



Restoring Trust and Reducing Perceived Influence: Superdelegates and the 2020 Democratic Nomination

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Abstract

For the 2020 presidential nomination, the Democratic Party reduced the influence of superdelegates. This reform was designed to appease Democratic voters by tipping the selection power toward voters and away from elites. Yet in 2020, superdelegates remained influential, as they retained the ability to endorse candidates early and shape the narrative and trajectory of the race.

Keywords Superdelegates · 2020 presidential nominations · Democratic Party reforms

Throughout history, the parties have tinkered with the amount of influence elites and voters possess in selecting the presidential nominees. Over time, there has been a trend toward democratization, to give the voters more say in choosing which candidate becomes the nominee. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the Democratic Party made sweeping changes to the presidential nomination process, designed to take the selection power out of the “smoke-filled rooms” where elites made decisions behind closed doors, and put it squarely in the hands of voters.

In the 1980s, as the consequences of these reforms manifested, the Democratic Party tried to rebalance the scale, tipping it back toward elites, by creating superdelegates—slots reserved for party and elected officials, who were free to vote for the candidate of their choice. The Democrats did this because parties may not always be well served by leaving this critical decision—which candidate will be the party’s standard-bearer—entirely to the masses. After all, the parties want a candidate who can win in November, represent the party and its platform, and positively affect the electoral fortunes of other party candidates on the ballot. Also, many party elites believe that their input should be valued because of their knowledge, experience, service, and loyalty to the party.

Though superdelegates have never overridden the preference of voters, they have often been unpopular and controversial. These concerns are often heightened during tight

nomination races. 2016 was no exception, as Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and his supporters denounced the presence of superdelegates, who mainly backed eventual nominee Hillary Clinton. Although the Democratic Party has always seen value in the inclusion of superdelegates in the process, the party took steps after 2016 to reduce the influence (or at least the perceived influence) of superdelegates, tipping the balance of power away from elites. Though the rule change was lauded at the time of its passage, concerns emerged early in the 2020 nomination process that the Democrats might have made a mistake. There were fears in both directions: some were concerned that the reform had actually elevated superdelegates, making them too powerful if the convention was contested; others worried that the reform may have weakened them too much, leaving voters able to select a nominee unsatisfactory to party elites. Ultimately, neither of those fears came to fruition—superdelegates exhibited their influence as they always have, through endorsing and supporting a candidate.

History of Superdelegates

Designed to inject peer review into the process, the Democratic Party created superdelegate slots prior to the 1984 nomination (Mayer 2009; Jewitt 2019). Officially known as unpledged party elite and elected official delegates, superdelegates originated out of dissatisfaction with the Democratic Party’s performance in the 1980 election and the declining number of elites in attendance at the national convention (Mayer 2009). Distinct from their pledged delegate

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counterparts, superdelegates become delegates on the basis of their elected status or party service, are free to support any candidate they choose (regardless of the preferences of voters in their district, state, or nationally), and can opt to announce their preference publicly in advance of the convention.

For those concerned with protecting the party, the advantages of superdelegates are clear. By nature of their positions and background, superdelegates are concerned with the state of the party, its success, and its future. They may be better suited than rank-and-file party members to assess a candidate's loyalty, agreement with the party platform, reflection of the party's values, and ability to lead the party. Superdelegates are also more likely to choose an "insider" candidate (Rudin 2008) who can perform well in the general election (Hawkings 2018). Since they are unbound, they can adapt to unforeseen circumstances (Kamarck 2009). Superdelegates are intended to serve as a check on the will of the people, with the potential to prevent a dangerous, unqualified, or unsatisfactory candidate from becoming the nominee. As Donald Trump marched to the 2016 Republican nomination, many Republican Party elites looked on in shock, and some lamented that superdelegates (which the Republican Party does not have) would have been useful.

Opponents of superdelegates argue that the practice is undemocratic, as it allows elites to circumvent voters' preferences. Though superdelegates have never prevented the nomination of a candidate who had won at least a plurality of delegates, Walter Mondale (in 1984) and Barack Obama (in 2008) only clinched the necessary majority of delegates with the help of superdelegates (Kamarck 2009). In 2016, some saw evidence of a "rigged system," pointing to the fact that Clinton had the overwhelming support of superdelegates and would therefore become the nominee regardless of how well Sanders did (Lane 2016).

Strong, early support from superdelegates can also alter media coverage and thus the momentum of candidates during a nomination race (Hawkings 2018). In 2016, Sanders emerged from Iowa and New Hampshire with more pledged delegates than Clinton, but the media widely reported that Clinton was leading the delegate count due to the number of superdelegates that had pledged their backing to her.¹ Opposition to superdelegates is not new. In the 1980s, presidential candidate Jesse Jackson rallied against them, claiming their presence was unfair and undemocratic, had given an undeserved advantage to Mondale in 1984, and hampered diverse representation within the party.²

¹ On February 16, 2016, a Google search of "Democratic delegates" yielded a graphic at the top of the search results. The graphic depicted Clinton as having 394 delegates to Sanders's 44 delegates. At the time, Clinton had 32 pledged delegates and Sanders had 36 pledged delegates.

² Letter from Rev. Jesse Jackson to Democratic National Committee Chairman Paul G. Kirk and DNC Fairness Commission Chairman Donald L. Fowler, October 21, 1985.

Dissatisfaction with Superdelegates

The findings of a national survey conducted by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research in May 2016 revealed that superdelegates are unpopular among the public, with a majority expressing disapproval.³ Approximately 32% of respondents said that superdelegates are a very bad idea and another 22% indicated they are a somewhat bad idea. Only 5% of respondents reported that superdelegates are a very good idea, and another 13% stated they are a somewhat good idea.

Unease over superdelegates emerges whenever there is a tight race on the Democratic side, as in 1984, 2008, and 2016. Despite these recurrent concerns, the Democratic Party has typically done little to appease critics and diminish the role of superdelegates. In fact, following Jackson's complaints in 1984, the Fairness Commission increased the number of superdelegate slots to the 1988 convention (Mayer 2009; Jewitt 2019). For the first time, after the 2016 outcry, the Democratic Party took steps that appeared to reduce the influence of superdelegates.

Changes for 2020

After Clinton clinched the nomination in June 2016, Sanders called for a series of reforms to the nomination process, including the elimination of superdelegates (Rafferty 2016). At the 2016 National Convention the following month, in an effort to strengthen the party, rebuild trust, repair divisions, and ensure a fair and transparent process, the Democratic Party created the Unity Reform Commission (URC). Comprised of members of both the Sanders and Clinton camps, the Unity Reform Commission was given several directives, one of which was to reduce the influence of superdelegates (Resolution Establishing the Unity Reform Commission 2016).

The URC ultimately recommended that elected officials remain as unpledged delegates, but the remaining 60% of superdelegates (including DNC members and state party officials) become pledged delegates, distributed proportionally to vote in accordance with the popular vote in their state or nationally (Report of the Unity Reform Commission 2017). Conceivably, this proposal would drastically reduce the influence of party elites in the process, removing the exalted status of a broad swath of superdelegates, as well as their freedom to support the candidate of their choice. As Putnam (2017) points out, "the URC *had to* make this recommendation to the Rules

³ The survey was conducted between May 12 and May 16, 2016, as the 2016 presidential nominations were ongoing but nearing completion. The publicly available data set and additional information about the survey can be found at: <https://apnorc.org/projects/the-frustrated-public-views-of-the-2016-campaign-the-parties-and-the-electoral-process/>

and Bylaws Committee” because of the directive it was given. Despite extensive debate and deliberation over superdelegates and their role in the process, the URC could not advance any solution other than the one that was outlined in the resolution which created the commission.

Though the final report of the Unity Reform Commission was issued in December 2017, the recommendations still needed to be adopted by the Rules and Bylaws Committee and the full Democratic National Committee. One of the messages emanating from the Democratic National Committee’s 2018 winter meeting was the need to reduce the “perceived influence” of superdelegates, with DNC Chairman Tom Perez advocating for reforms to regain voters’ trust in the process (Barrow 2018). Yet the party still needed to decide what exactly the reduction in influence would look like for 2020.

Ultimately, in the summer of 2018, the Democratic National Committee deviated from the recommendations of the URC. It chose not to implement the URC recommendation that 60% of superdelegates become pledged delegates bound by the outcome of the primaries and caucuses. Instead, it approved reforms that would preserve the ability of superdelegates to support the candidate of their choice. Superdelegates would now be prohibited from voting on the first ballot at the National Convention if their votes could be influential in the outcome.⁴ (However, if their votes could not sway the nomination, superdelegates would be permitted to vote on the first ballot.) If no candidate received a majority of pledged delegates on the first ballot, superdelegates would be allowed to vote on subsequent ballots.

Using actual delegate counts illuminates the nuances of this rule change. In 2020, there were 3979 pledged Democratic delegates and 771 superdelegates, for a total of 4750 delegates. Per usual, a candidate needed to receive a majority (50% + 1 of the delegates) to win the nomination. Thus, to become the 2020 Democratic nominee, a candidate needed to win 1991 pledged delegates on the first ballot. If no candidate won at least 1991 pledged delegates on the first ballot and a second ballot was required, superdelegates would be allowed to vote, and a candidate would need 2375.5 delegates to win.⁵ If a candidate secured 2376 pledged delegates on the first ballot, then superdelegates would be allowed to vote on the first ballot because they could not change the outcome.

With this maneuver, the Democratic Party appeared to be shifting the balance of power away from party elites toward rank-and-file party members. Superdelegates were designed to safeguard the direction of the Democratic Party, but the party reduced superdelegates’ influence to assuage rank-and-file party members who are unhappy with the role of

superdelegates and how the 2016 nomination unfolded. Chairman Perez touted the reform as a way to “return power to the grassroots” and restore trust in the Democratic Party and the nominating process (CBS News 2018). Sanders applauded the changes, recognizing them as “an important step forward in making the Democratic Party more open, democratic, and responsive to the input of ordinary Americans” (NPR 2018).

This rule change was particularly notable because the Democratic National Committee members who voted for its passage were superdelegates themselves. With this, they reduced their own influence in the selection of the party’s presidential nominee. Though the rule change ultimately passed via a voice vote, there was resistance prior to its passage. Led by two former chairs of the DNC, Don Fowler and Donna Brazile, opponents raised concerns over diminishing the role, experience, and valued input of elites and disenfranchising minority voices in the process (Pearson 2018, Associated Press 2018). In an op-ed, Brazile wrote a scathing commentary on the rule change: “So, we superdelegates are now what? Merely the mechanism you default to in case of a tie? Great. I’ve fought for the Democratic Party my entire life, and now I’m one notch above a coin toss” (Brazile 2018).

Concerns Emerge for 2020

A little more than a year after Brazile’s lament, as the 2020 nomination race geared up, there were mumblings by some that the Democratic Party may have made a mistake in changing the rules of superdelegates. Yet concern went in both directions: had the Democratic Party made superdelegates too weak or too powerful?

With a crowded field, mixed signals about who was the early front-runner,⁶ chaos in the Iowa caucuses,⁷ and a billionaire (former New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg) who skipped the early contests, it seemed possible that no candidate would head into the National Convention with a majority of delegates. As Sanders gained ground, winning the New Hampshire primary and the Nevada caucuses, a segment of the party became nervous that the democratic socialist would become the Democratic nominee. Some superdelegates admitted that there had been discussions about whether the rules could be changed again, what a convention floor fight would look like, suggestions of possible candidates who could emerge victorious on a second (or third or fourth) ballot, and whether President Obama might mediate a solution (Siders

⁴ This rule, and others, are detailed in the Call for the 2020 Democratic National Convention, available at: <https://democrats.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2020-Call-for-Convention-WITH-Attachments-2.26.19.pdf>

⁵ Superdelegates from Democrats Abroad have a half-vote.

⁶ At the close of 2019, Sanders was leading in fundraising and Biden was leading in national polls.

⁷ The 2020 Iowa caucuses were plagued by chaos, caused in part by new requirements for reporting three distinct vote totals, a malfunctioning app for submitting the results to the state party, and problems with the back-up phone system. As a result, it was days before the American public knew who had won the critical first contest of the nomination season.

2020; Lerer 2020). In the first nomination after the party had tipped the scales towards voters, it seemed plausible that they might nominate a candidate not supported by elites, and that chaos might ensue.

Ironically, it also appeared possible that this chaos could result in superdelegates playing an even greater role than ever. After conducting interviews with almost one hundred superdelegates, Lerer and Epstein reported that they “got the distinct sense that a faction of the Democratic Party is worried enough about Mr. Sanders that they are willing to throw the party into a brokered convention, the kind of messy political battle not seen since 1952, when the Democratic nominee was Adlai Stevenson” (Lerer and Epstein 2020). The large number of candidates, lack of early consensus over a candidate, and the possibility of a contested convention meant that the nomination might be decided on a second ballot. In that case, superdelegates would essentially decide who became the nominee. Had the Democratic Party made a mistake?

Sanders, Superdelegates, and Self-Interest

Once again, the Sanders campaign was at the heart of this discussion, especially after the Vermont senator enjoyed success in the first contests on the nomination calendar. Though Sanders had been vocally opposed to superdelegates as a matter of principle, demanding reforms that appeared to reduce their influence, the Vermont senator also exhibited more than a hint of self-interest on this issue in both 2016 and 2020.

In 2016, Sanders refused to withdraw until Clinton captured the necessary majority of delegates and called for superdelegates to support his candidacy. With Clinton holding a lead among pledged delegates in May 2016, Sanders argued superdelegates should take public opinion polls into account, which showed him as a stronger candidate against Trump in the general election (Greenfield 2016). In other words, despite his opposition to superdelegates, Sanders argued that they should support a candidate who was trailing in the pledged delegate count—himself.

In the months and years following his unsuccessful attempt to sway the 2016 superdelegates, Sanders and his supporters successfully worked to revise the role of superdelegates for the 2020 nomination season. The Democratic Party implemented the aforementioned rule changes, so that superdelegates could not vote on the first ballot if they could affect the outcome. With Sanders leading in the pledged delegate count in February 2020 after the first few contests, Chuck Todd asked the candidates during a debate if a plurality winner who had not captured the necessary majority of delegates should become “the unquestioned Democratic nominee” (Kilgore 2020). Out of the six candidates on the stage, five said no. Only Sanders argued that the superdelegates should support the candidate with a plurality of pledged delegates, even if that

candidate did not have a majority. Sanders’s apparent waffling on superdelegates did not go unnoticed. One of his opponents, Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren, stated, “you write the rules before you know where everybody stands. And then you stick with those rules... I don’t see how come you get to change it just because he now thinks there’s an advantage to him for doing that” (Allen 2020).

The Continued Influence of Superdelegates

Concerns and speculations over a brokered convention ultimately did not pan out in 2020. While superdelegates did not have the outsized influence many anticipated or feared, they did retain influence. Though superdelegates occasionally have been needed to push a candidate beyond the majority threshold, they have never acted against the will of the voters, always supporting the candidate that has the plurality of pledged delegates. Their real strength and power have never been in deciding at the convention who will become the nominee. It has always been in their ability to endorse candidates early and shape the narrative and trajectory of the race. This is what ultimately happened in 2020, albeit later than usual.

Though the party often decides by coalescing around a candidate in the invisible primary (Cohen et al. 2008), that process was hesitant and delayed in 2020. Only about a third of Democratic members of Congress and governors, all of whom are superdelegates, had endorsed a candidate by mid-January, a rate that is roughly on par with Republican endorsements in 2016 (Skelley 2019, 2020). Unlike 2016, when Democratic superdelegates overwhelmingly supported Clinton, superdelegates were not unified around a candidate in 2020, though Biden was leading in endorsements. The number of superdelegates who held off on endorsing was likely due to a combination of factors that included the lack of a clear front-runner, the sizable number of candidates in the race, ideological divisions within the party, a reluctance to publicize their support in a process that was criticized as being “rigged” four years earlier, and a prioritization on uncovering the candidate most electable against President Trump. The lack of a clear signal from party elites contributed to the race’s uncertainty.

Biden had always argued that the South Carolina primary, the first southern contest, would be the true test of his campaign and demonstrate his support among minorities and his ability to assemble a winning coalition. Following losses in the first three states, Biden needed a conclusive victory in South Carolina to demonstrate he was still in the race. His ability to do so was strengthened when he secured the most influential endorsement in the state. As the highest-ranking African-American in Congress, Representative and Majority Whip James Clyburn is respected and revered in South Carolina Democratic politics. Heavily anticipated and highly

sought after, Clyburn's endorsement came a mere three days before the South Carolina primary, when late polling showed approximately 15% of voters were undecided (Aleem 2020). Clyburn's endorsement proved critical for Biden and was a tipping point in the nomination race. Biden won a resounding victory in South Carolina, where he captured more than 48% of the vote.⁸ In his victory speech following the primary, Biden proclaimed, "my buddy, Jim Clyburn, brought me back."⁹

Clyburn's endorsement was described as setting off a "chain reaction" (Strauss 2020) and creating a "political surge" (Kane 2020). In the five days between Clyburn's endorsement and Super Tuesday (held three days after South Carolina, when fourteen states were voting), Biden amassed endorsements from more than twenty other superdelegates. Among these were one of his competitors for the nomination, Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar, who withdrew from the race following the South Carolina primary.¹⁰ Biden headed into Super Tuesday with momentum from the South Carolina victory, dozens of endorsements, increased support and cohesion from the party, and a smaller field of opponents. He emerged from Super Tuesday as the clear front-runner. As the coronavirus pandemic altered the nomination race, Biden continued to widen his delegate lead over Sanders. Despite the initial fears of a brokered convention, Biden did well enough on Super Tuesday and in later contests to become the prohibitive favorite for the nomination. . Ultimately, Biden secured more than 2376 pledged delegates, therefore allowing superdelegates to vote on the first ballot, just as they always have.

The 2020 rule changes were not designed to reduce the actual influence of superdelegates necessarily, but they were meant to reduce their perceived influence. In 2020, superdelegates may have been less influential than in the past, not because of the rule changes but because many party leaders and elected officials were slow and hesitant to endorse and coalesce around a candidate, given the crowded field and other factors.

Moving Forward

Given the conclusion of the 2020 nomination process, there are fewer calls for reform now than there have been in previous cycles. The reforms enacted in 2018 for the 2020

⁸ Sanders came in second in the South Carolina primary, winning just shy of 20% of the vote.

⁹ Biden's South Carolina primary victory speech can be viewed in its entirety at: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?469880-1/joe-biden-wins-south-carolina-democratic-primary>

¹⁰ Though not a superdelegate, the former Mayor of South Bend, Indiana, Pete Buttigieg, also withdrew from the race following the South Carolina primary and endorsed Biden.

nomination process were designed to be temporary, but the delegates to the 2020 National Convention cast virtual ballots on a resolution to cement them for the 2024 nominating cycle (Marans 2020). Before being voted on by the full Convention, the resolution received support from the Democratic National Convention's Rules Committee, Sanders supporters, and the Biden campaign (Marans 2020b). Praising the "substantial steps to ensure a more accessible, transparent, and inclusive" process taken prior to the 2020 nomination, the resolution instructs the Democratic National Committee's Rules and Bylaws Committee to build on these reforms for 2024.

At this point, it appears likely that the Democratic Party will extend these rule changes for the 2024 nomination cycle, ensuring that superdelegates cannot overturn the will of the voters. However, the resolution passed at the 2020 National Convention tasks the Rules and Bylaws Committee with reviewing the 2020 nomination process and issuing a report by March 2021 (Marans 2020; Putnam 2020).¹¹ This timeline gives the Democrats enough time to craft the specifics of their rules for 2024 and leaves open the possibility that there could still be changes to the superdelegate rules. Parties tend to change the nominating process more drastically in years that they lose the presidential election, so the outcome in November may also influence what role superdelegates will play in 2024 and beyond.

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¹¹ The Democratic National Convention Rules Committee also declined to support a proposal, advanced by a Sanders supporter, to amend the party's charter on the issue of superdelegates, which would implement the reforms permanently (Marans 2020b).

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