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CANDIDATE CHOICE BEFORE THE CONVENTION: The Democrats in 1984

Alan I. Abramowitz

This paper analyzes prenomination presidential candidate preferences, using data from the Center for Political Studies' 1984 Continuous Monitoring Survey. Among Democratic identifiers, affective evaluations of the candidates were the strongest influence on candidate preference, but judgments concerning the candidates' nomination prospects and electability also influenced candidate preference, as did strength of party identification. The outcomes of particular primaries strongly influenced voters' opinions regarding the candidates' nomination prospects and, indirectly, their electability. Walter Mondale's decisive victory in the New York primary on April 3 apparently led to a "bandwagon effect" among Democratic voters across the nation; that is, the perception that Mondale was very likely to win the nomination produced a dramatic shift in candidate preference toward Mondale and away from Gary Hart.

Almost all of the research on candidate choice in presidential elections has been concerned with voting in the general election. Since 1968, most of the delegates to the Democratic and Republican presidential nominating conventions have been chosen in primary elections. In order to win a presidential nomination, a candidate must appeal directly to the voters. However, very little is known about voter decision-making before the nomination. While there has been a good deal of research on voter turnout in presidential primary elections (Ranney, 1968, 1972; Morris and Davis, 1975; Lengle, 1981), only a few studies have analyzed prenomination candidate preferences (Williams et al., 1976; Lengle, 1981; Gopoian, 1982; Wattier, 1983; Bartels, 1985).

There are several important differences between prenomination and gen-

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eral election campaigns which may affect voters' decision-making processes. First, the prenomination campaign is an *intraparty* contest. The candidates cannot be distinguished by their party labels. Moreover, participation in presidential primaries is generally limited to voters affiliated with a particular party. For these reasons, the voters' party identification, which provides an important cue for evaluating and choosing between candidates in general elections, cannot play the same role before the nomination.

A second difference between prenomination and general election campaigns is that general elections determine who will hold public office, while primary elections determine only who will run against the opposition party's candidate in the general election. As a result, in selecting a candidate for their party's nomination, voters may anticipate the consequences of their choice for the general election campaign. Voters may weigh the candidates' relative electability as well as their relative attractiveness. While it is often assumed that party leaders are concerned about winning, and recent evidence indicates that party activists are strongly influenced by electability (Stone and Abramowitz, 1983), the possibility that ordinary voters consider electability in deciding whom to support for their party's nomination has been largely ignored.

The possibility of such "strategic voting" may be increased by another distinctive characteristic of presidential nominating campaigns: the sequential timing of the primaries. Because presidential primaries are spread over a period of several months, voters receive regular reports on the candidates' relative performance and nomination prospects as the campaign progresses. In covering the campaign, the mass media, and especially the television networks, tend to focus primarily on the "horse-race" aspects of the nominating process—evaluating the candidates' relative standing and future prospects (Ranney, 1983; Arterton, 1984). This may contribute to voters' interest in electability. Performance in the primaries may be used, correctly or incorrectly, to gauge candidates' vote-getting ability in the general election.

Aside from any concern about electability, voters may derive some psychological satisfaction from supporting a candidate who appears to be the front-runner for the nomination. In politics, as in sports, rooting for a winner is more enjoyable than rooting for a loser. In general election campaigns, this bandwagon psychology may be limited by voters' party loyalties and policy preferences. In prenomination campaigns, though, policy differences between candidates are often muted, and party loyalties are not engaged as they are in a general election campaign. Moreover, while public opinion polls provide voters with information on the relative standing of candidates during the general election campaign, this information may not have as great an impact on voters as reports on the results of primary elections during the nominating campaign. The sequential timing of the primaries and media

preoccupation with the horse race may lead to a bandwagon effect among voters (Bartels, 1985).

Both strategic and bandwagon voting may contribute to the volatility of prenomination candidate preferences. Even if voters do not change their opinions about the candidates' qualifications, policies, or personal characteristics, new information about the candidates' nomination prospects, based on the results of recent primaries, may cause voters to reassess the candidates' chances of winning the general election and to shift their candidate preference.

THE 1984 DEMOCRATIC NOMINATING CAMPAIGN

The most dramatic development of the 1984 Democratic nominating campaign was the rise and fall of Gary Hart's candidacy. A relatively obscure Senator from Colorado known primarily for having managed George McGovern's 1972 presidential campaign, Hart emerged from a field of candidates challenging Walter Mondale for the Democratic nomination by finishing second to Mondale in the Iowa precinct caucuses and defeating him in the New Hampshire primary. Like George McGovern in 1972 and Jimmy Carter in 1976, Gary Hart used the New Hampshire primary to attract media coverage and thereby gain national recognition. Like McGovern and Carter, Hart emerged from obscurity to front-runner status in a few weeks. Unlike McGovern and Carter, though, Hart lost his front-runner status and the nomination. The most intriguing question about the 1984 Democratic nominating campaign is how Walter Mondale managed to overcome his loss in New Hampshire and overtake Gary Hart to win the nomination.

EXPLAINING PRENOMINATION CANDIDATE PREFERENCE

This study will analyze the influence of four variables on prenomination candidate preference: candidate affect, party identification, electability, and viability. The first independent variable, candidate affect, requires little explanation. We expect voters to support the candidate about whom they have the most favorable opinion. This opinion may be based on the candidates' qualifications, personal characteristics, or issue positions.¹

Under certain conditions, voters' party loyalties may have some influence on candidate choice in primary elections. While all of the candidates in a primary election share the same party label, they may differ in their degree of identification with the party as an organization and with its leaders. Voters, too, will differ in their degree of attachment to the party. A candidate who is closely identified with the party's organization and leadership will probably appeal more to strong partisans than to weak partisans, while

a candidate who is perceived as challenging the party organization will probably receive greater support from voters with weak party loyalties than from strong partisans.

In 1984, Walter Mondale was the clear favorite of party leaders for the Democratic nomination. Gary Hart campaigned as an "outsider" challenging the party "establishment." We would therefore expect Mondale to appeal most to Democrats with strong party loyalties, while we would expect Gary Hart to appeal most to weak and independent Democrats. We expect party identification to influence affect toward Mondale and Hart. In addition, party identification may have a direct influence on candidate preference.

In choosing a candidate for their party's nomination, voters may consider the consequences of their choice for the general election. They may weigh electability along with their affect toward the candidates. Given the two-stage structure of the presidential selection process, such strategic voting is entirely rational: the "utility" which a voter may expect from a particular candidate depends upon that candidate's chance of being elected as well as the candidate's qualifications, character, and issue positions (Abramowitz and Stone, 1984). Of course, voters' judgments about the relative electability of candidates may be biased by their feelings toward the candidates; that is, they may perceive a candidate they like as more electable than a candidate they dislike. However, judgments about the candidates' electoral prospects may be more than rationalizations of candidate affect. Voters may also judge the candidates' electability on the basis of their performance in the primaries. A candidate who is successful in the primaries may be viewed as more electable than a candidate who is unsuccessful.

In addition to electability, voters' perceptions of the candidates' viability may also influence their candidate preference. If voters derive some psychological satisfaction from supporting a winner, a candidate who is successful in the primaries and seems likely to win the nomination should be preferred over a candidate who is unsuccessful in the primaries. While judgments about the candidates' nomination prospects, like judgments about their electability, may be biased by voters' affect toward the candidates, the evidence of the primaries will be difficult to ignore since the media focus so much attention on the candidates' performance and nomination prospects.²

DATA AND MEASURES

Data analyzed in this paper come from the Continuous Monitoring Study conducted by the Center for Political Studies (CPS) at the University of Michigan during the 1984 presidential nominating campaign. Interviews were conducted by telephone with a separate national cross-section of approximately 75 eligible voters each week between January 11 and June 19, 1984.

A total of 1,725 interviews were conducted during this period. Since we were interested in analyzing preferences for the Democratic presidential nomination, only voters who identified with the Democratic Party—those classified as strong, weak, or independent Democrats on the CPS 7-point party identification scale—were included in the study. This reduced the effective number of respondents in the survey to 873.

The measure of candidate preference used in this study is the respondent's first choice for the Democratic presidential nomination. Among the Democrats who were interviewed, Walter Mondale was the first choice of 35%, while Gary Hart was the first choice of 24%. No other candidate was preferred by as many as 10% of Democratic voters: among the declared candidates, Jesse Jackson was favored by 7%, followed by John Glenn with 4%. Because relatively few Democrats favored any of the other candidates, we will restrict our attention to voters who favored either Mondale or Hart. A preference for Walter Mondale was coded as +1, while a preference for Gary Hart was coded as 0.

Party identification was measured by the traditional CPS 7-point scale. Because only Democratic identifiers were included in the study, we used a reduced version of the party identification scale with strong Democrats coded as +1 and weak or independent Democrats coded as 0.³

Candidate affect was measured by the relative ratings given to Walter Mondale and Gary Hart on the CPS feeling thermometer scale. We created our measure of candidate affect by subtracting Gary Hart's feeling thermometer score from Walter Mondale's feeling thermometer score. This created a scale ranging from -100 (the most pro-Hart rating) to +100 (the most pro-Mondale rating). Respondents who could not rate either Mondale or Hart (a relatively small number after the New Hampshire primary) were excluded from further analysis.

In addition to rating candidates on the feeling thermometer scale, respondents were asked to rate the candidates' chances of winning the Democratic nomination and, if nominated, the general election, using a scale ranging from 0 (no chance) to 100 (certain to win). We used these scales to construct measures of the candidates' relative viability and electability. Relative viability was measured by subtracting Gary Hart's chance of winning the nomination from Walter Mondale's chance of winning the nomination. Likewise, relative electability was measured by subtracting Hart's chance of winning the general election from Mondale's chance of winning the general election. Both scales range from -100 (the most pro-Hart score) to +100 (the most pro-Mondale score). Relatively few respondents interviewed after the New Hampshire primary were unable to rate the candidates' chances of being nominated or elected. However, the questions concerning Gary Hart's chances of being nominated and elected were not included in the survey until after

his victory in New Hampshire. Therefore, all respondents interviewed before February 28 must be excluded from any analyses using the viability or electability variables.

Because interviews were conducted throughout the campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, it is possible to analyze the impact of major campaign events on voters' attitudes toward the candidates. Six events were selected for this purpose: the New Hampshire primary, Super Tuesday, the Illinois primary, the New York primary, the Ohio and Indiana primaries, and the final set of primaries on June 5, which included California and New Jersey. The New Hampshire primary on February 28 established Gary Hart as a major contender for the Democratic nomination. On Super Tuesday (March 13), Gary Hart outpolled Walter Mondale, but Mondale managed to revive his campaign by winning the Alabama and Georgia primaries. In Illinois on March 20, Walter Mondale won a narrow victory in the first northern industrial state to hold a primary. Mondale's decisive victory in the New York primary on April 3 reestablished him as the front-runner for the nomination. Narrow victories in the Ohio and Indiana primaries on May 1 kept Gary Hart's hopes of winning the nomination alive. Finally, on June 5, the last day of presidential primaries, Walter Mondale's victory in New Jersey was widely interpreted as clinching the nomination for the former vice-president despite Gary Hart's decisive victory in California on the same day.

In order to estimate the impact of these campaign events on voters' attitudes toward the candidates, we created a variable for each event based on the date on which respondents were interviewed. For each event, a respondent was assigned a score of +1 if he or she was interviewed after the date of that event and 0 if he or she was interviewed before the date of that event.

FINDINGS

Figure 1 shows the trend in candidate support among Democrats from early January through the middle of June. The survey data have been grouped in three-week clusters to provide more reliable estimates.⁴ The vertical line on the graph represents the New Hampshire primary.

There were two major shifts in voter support for Mondale and Hart during the prenomination campaign. Immediately after the New Hampshire primary, the proportion of Democrats favoring Gary Hart rose from 2% to 30%, while support for Walter Mondale dropped from 40% to 26%. Hart's surge continued into late March. The next dramatic turning point in the campaign was the New York primary on April 3. Support for Gary Hart dropped from 40% in late March to 24% in early April; support for Walter Mondale rose from 23% before the New York primary to 42% after the primary.

Part of Gary Hart's surge following the New Hampshire primary was

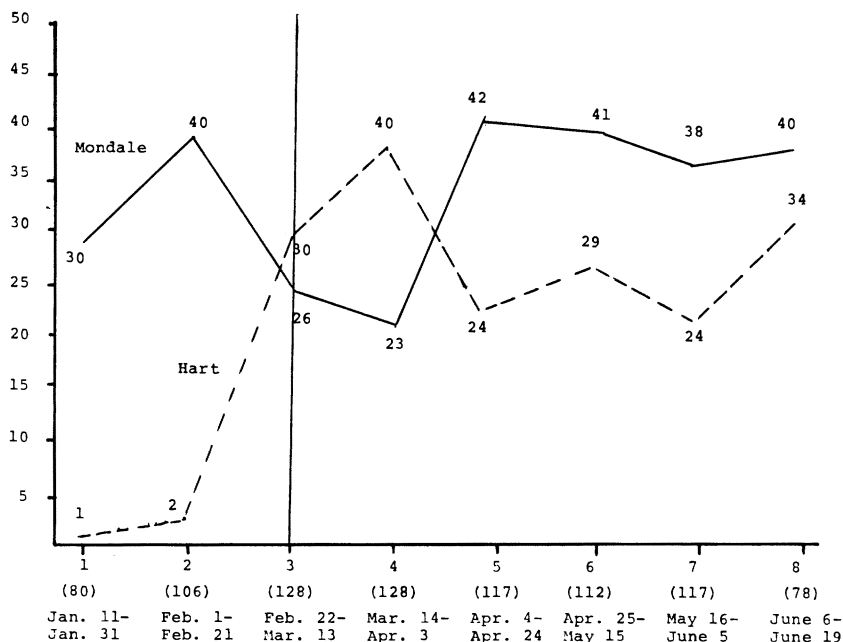


FIG 1. Trend in candidate support among Democrats.

undoubtedly due to increased recognition resulting from media coverage of his victory. Figure 2 shows the trend in candidate recognition (the proportion of Democrats able to recognize and rate the candidates on the feeling thermometer) during the campaign. Less than half of the Democrats interviewed before the New Hampshire primary were able to recognize and rate Gary Hart. By late March, however, the proportion of Democrats able to recognize and rate Gary Hart was almost as great as the proportion able to recognize and rate Walter Mondale.

While Gary Hart's post-New Hampshire surge was based on increased recognition, Walter Mondale's comeback after the New York primary cannot be attributed to increased familiarity. Over 95% of Democratic voters were familiar with Mondale before his victory in New York. In order to explain Mondale's comeback, we must turn our attention to other possible factors, such as candidate affect, viability, and electability.

Figure 3 shows the trends in candidate affect, viability, and electability during the campaign. Along with a surge in recognition, Gary Hart also enjoyed a surge in affect relative to Walter Mondale after winning the New Hampshire primary. However, after late February, there was very little

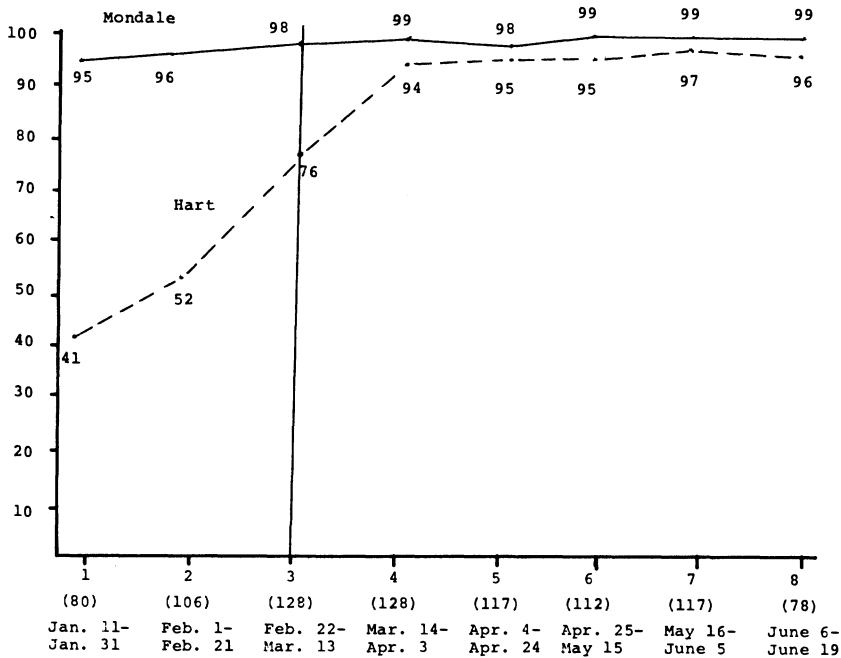


FIG 2. Trend in candidate recognition among Democrats.

change in voters' affect toward Mondale and Hart. This suggests that Mondale's comeback after the New York primary did not result primarily from a change in voters' feelings about the two leading candidates. What did change dramatically after the New York primary were voters' perceptions of Mondale's and Hart's chances of winning the nomination. Before April 3, the two candidates were given about an equal chance of being nominated; after April 3, Walter Mondale was viewed as a strong favorite to win the nomination. To a lesser extent, voters' perceptions of Mondale's and Hart's electability also changed in Mondale's favor following his victory in New York. Taken together, the evidence presented in Figure 3 suggests that Walter Mondale's comeback after April 3 was due largely to changing perceptions of Mondale's and Hart's chances of winning the nomination and the general election.

In order to test our hypotheses regarding prenomination candidate preference, a probit analysis was conducted, using candidate choice (Mondale vs. Hart) as the dependent variable, and candidate affect, viability, electability, and party identification as independent variables. The results are presented in Table 1. Since affect, viability, and electability were measured on the same scale, we can directly compare their effects on candidate

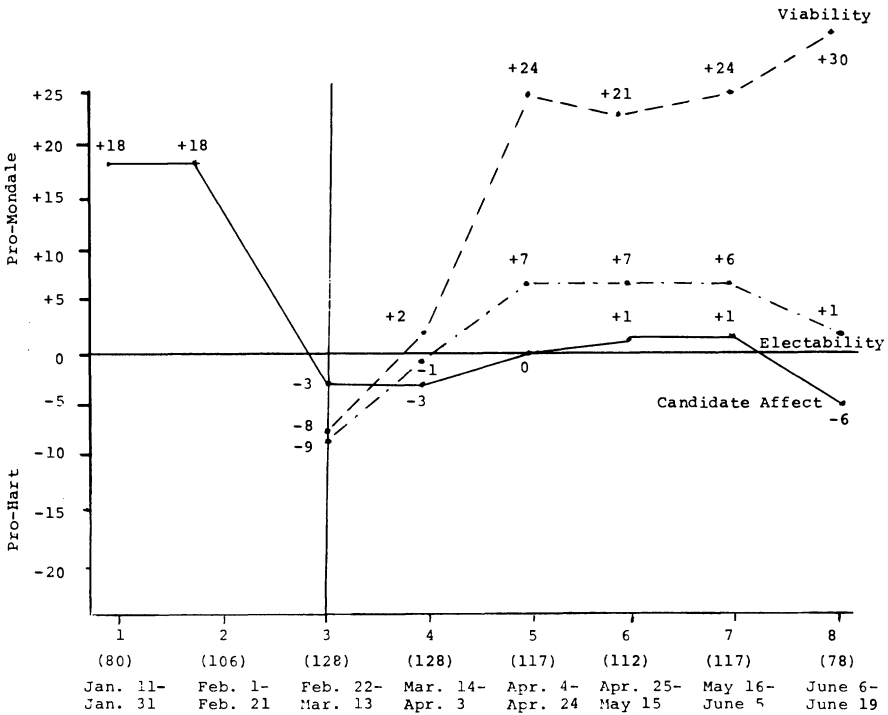


FIG 3. Relative candidate affect, viability, and electability over time (Mondale vs. Hart).

preference: the coefficients in Table 1 are maximum likelihood estimates of the change in standard units of the cumulative normal distribution associated with a change of one unit on each independent variable. As expected, candidate affect had the strongest direct influence on candidate preference. However, both electability and viability had strong direct effects on candidate preference. In addition, party identification had a significant impact on candidate preference.

These results provide strong support for our model of prenomination candidate preference. In addition to weighing their likes and dislikes about the presidential candidates, voters apparently consider the candidates' chances of being nominated and elected. Voters appear to recognize that the nomination is only the first step in a two-stage selection process; that is, the party's nominee must win the general election before the party's supporters can enjoy the rewards of power. In addition, voters seem to favor a candidate who appears likely to win the nomination. They appear to find it more satisfying to support a winner than to support a loser. Finally, voters' party loyal-

ties can provide a cue for choosing between candidates who share the same party label but differ in their degree of association with the party's organization and leadership.

We have hypothesized that voters' judgments concerning the candidates' nomination and election prospects are based on the results of the primaries. Multiple-regression analyses were conducted to estimate the effects of primary results on voters' affective evaluations of the candidates as well as their perceptions of the candidates' viability and electability. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 2. Of the six major primaries (or sets of pri-

TABLE 1. Probit Analysis of Candidate Preference Among Democrats (Mondale vs. Hart)^a

Independent Variable	M.L.E.	(S.E.)	Significance
Candidate affect	.048	(.006)	.001
Electability	.028	(.006)	.001
Viability	.016	(.004)	.001
Party identification	.599	(.198)	.001
Constant	-.338	(.131)	.01

Estimated $R^2 = .83$

Percentage predicted correctly = 89.2

^aEach coefficient represents the change in standard units of the cumulative normal distribution corresponding to a one-unit change in a given independent variable. Since the scales of measurement differ across independent variables, raw coefficients cannot be directly compared to assess the relative strength or importance of the independent variables.

TABLE 2. Effects of Primary Results on Candidate Affect, Viability, and Electability in 1984^a

Independent Variable	Candidate Affect	Viability	Electability
New Hampshire	-26.5 (4.1)		
Super Tuesday	10.5 (5.0)	6.2 (5.5)	2.0 (3.9)
Illinois	- 3.3 (4.9)	6.7 (5.1)	-0.0 (3.6)
New York	3.8 (3.9)	16.7 (4.1)	1.3 (2.9)
Ohio/Indiana	0.2 (3.0)	- 0.7 (3.1)	1.2 (2.2)
Finale	- 6.6 (3.7)	10.0 (3.9)	-5.8 (2.8)
Party Identification	12.1 (2.2)	0.8 (2.6)	0.4 (1.8)
Candidate Affect		.40 (.04)	.34 (.03)
Viability			.26 (.03)
Constant	12.2	- 6.8	-3.2
R^2	.11	.26	.37
(N)	(708)	(569)	(569)

^aEntries shown are unstandardized regression coefficients with corresponding standard errors.

maries) included in the analysis, the New Hampshire primary had by far the strongest impact on voters' affective evaluations of the candidates: a shift of 26.5 degrees in Gary Hart's favor on the feeling thermometer scale. The estimates of the effects of later primaries, including New York, were much lower and generally fell below the level of statistical significance. As expected, party identification had a significant influence on affective evaluations of the candidates: strong Democrats rated Walter Mondale more favorably (compared with Gary Hart) than weak or independent Democrats.

While the New York primary apparently had very little impact on affective evaluations of the candidates, it had a strong impact on voters' perceptions of the candidates' chances of winning the Democratic nomination: a shift of 16.7 percentage points in favor of Walter Mondale. In addition, the results of the final set of primaries on June 5 reinforced the perception that Walter Mondale would be the Democratic nominee—producing an estimated shift of 10 percentage points in Mondale's favor.

The results of the primaries included in our regression analysis apparently had little or no *direct* impact on voters' opinions about the candidates' chances in the general election. Only one of the coefficients, for the final set of primaries, reached the level of statistical significance. However, judgments about the candidates' nomination prospects had a strong influence on judgments about their electability. Thus, the results of certain primaries, such as the New York primary, indirectly affected judgments about Mondale's and Hart's electability.

It is interesting to note that the results of the primaries held on June 5 apparently increased Walter Mondale's viability while decreasing his electability in the eyes of Democratic voters. Mondale's failure to defeat Gary Hart more decisively, and especially his loss to Hart in California, may have raised questions in many voters' minds about his chances of defeating Ronald Reagan in November.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Voters respond differently to a nominating campaign than to a general election campaign. They base their choice not only on how well they like the candidates, but on their perceptions of the candidates' chances of winning the nomination and the general election. While these strategic calculations are biased by voters' affective evaluations of the candidates, they are also based on the results of the primaries as interpreted by the mass media.

These findings suggest that media coverage has a much greater potential for influencing voters' candidate preferences in a nominating campaign than in a general election campaign. In 1984, as in other recent presidential nominating campaigns, the candidate winning the New Hampshire primary

received an enormous boost toward the nomination. Media coverage of Gary Hart's upset victory in New Hampshire produced a surge in his recognition and popularity among Democratic voters across the nation.

No later primary had as dramatic an impact as the New Hampshire primary. However, even though affective evaluations of the candidates were relatively stable after New Hampshire, the results of later primaries did strongly influence voters' opinions of the candidates' chances of winning the Democratic nomination and, to a lesser extent, their prospects in November. The New York primary was especially significant in this regard. Mondale's victory in New York apparently led to a bandwagon effect among Democratic voters across the nation; that is, the perception that Mondale was likely to win the nomination produced a dramatic shift in voter support toward the former vice-president.

The sequential timing of the presidential primaries and the mass media's emphasis on the horse-race aspects of the campaign increase the likelihood of bandwagon effects in presidential nominating campaigns. Even if voters' affective evaluations of the candidates are unaffected by media coverage, their opinions about the candidates' viability and electability may be influenced by coverage which emphasizes the candidates' performance in the primaries and nomination prospects. These opinions affect voters' candidate preferences. Thus, a decision by the media to confer front-runner status on a candidate can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Much more research is needed on prenomination candidate-choice behavior in order to determine the generalizability of the findings reported in this study. Future research should also focus on candidate choice among actual primary voters. Given the importance of primary elections in the leadership selection process in the United States, such research is long overdue.

Acknowledgment. The data used in this study were made available by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research.

NOTES

1. With relative affect included in the analysis, evaluations of the candidates' personal characteristics, ideological views, and issue positions had no *direct* impact on candidate preference.
2. The assumption that candidate evaluation is causally prior to perceptions of viability and electability appears plausible, since affect toward a candidate is probably a more central attitude in voters' belief systems than opinions regarding his or her chances of winning a nomination or election. It is possible, of course, that perceptions of candidates' viability or electability affect some voters' affective evaluations of the candidates, especially party leaders and activists, who may be more concerned about strategic considerations than ordinary voters. Unfortunately, the items available in the rolling cross-section survey do not appear to satisfy the requirements necessary to estimate such reciprocal effects. In any event, among the general voting public the effects of candidate evaluations on judgments of viability and

- electability are probably much stronger than the effects of viability and electability on candidate evaluations.
3. There was very little difference in candidate preference between weak Democrats and independent Democrats.
 4. Because of the overlapping sampling procedure used by CPS, these three-week segments cut across sampling periods. However, there were no significant differences on a wide variety of social and political characteristics between respondents interviewed during the earlier and later portions of these sampling periods.

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