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# *Party Competition and the Prisoner's Dilemma: An Argument for the Direct Primary*

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A commonly held belief among students of American politics is that competition within political parties undermines the ability of parties to foster the democratic control of government. This essay questions this view. Relying on the logic of the Prisoner's Dilemma, we argue that intraparty competition is an important ingredient for parties to be responsive to the wishes of voters. This argument is unorthodox, since most scholars think intraparty competition inhibits the ability of parties to meet the demands of the electorate. Intraparty competition does have costs, but the benefits, we believe, outweigh those costs.

This argument is important in that primaries, one form of intraparty competition, dominate the nominating processes in the United States. While this essay does not comment on the specific arrangements for selecting nominees, it does provide theoretical justification for devices, such as the direct primary, that promote intraparty competition.

The direct primary dots the landscape of American politics. For nearly all elected offices, candidates must compete in these intraparty contests to secure their party's nomination. In the presidential case, about two-thirds of the states use the direct primary to select delegates to the national conventions (Crotty and Jackson 1985). For congressional and gubernatorial offices, almost all states employ primaries to choose nominees (Jewell and Olson 1988). Even candidates for local political office generally must jump the hurdle of a primary (Jewell and Olson 1988). Most potential office-holders, therefore, must be able to compete successfully in these contests to gain public office. Yet despite the widespread use of primaries, prevailing theory suggests that these elections *undermine* the ability of political parties to

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serve the interests of voters. Using the logic of the Prisoner's Dilemma, we argue that these previous theories have been incomplete and that one requirement for parties to serve the needs of voters is the existence of open and genuine *intraparty* competition, which primaries can promote.

This argument is important because scholars and pundits often suggest that the parties should find ways to limit their internal struggles. Thus, there have been frequent calls for such reforms as lessening the influence of primaries and increasing the role of party leaders (see, for instance, Polsby 1983; Ceasar 1979, 1982). All these suggestions rest on the assumption that intraparty competition undermines the ability of parties to foster democratic government. We take issue with that view. This essay, as a result, offers a new twist to the long standing debate over how parties can promote democracy.

#### BACKGROUND

Most political scientists believe that parties are essential to democratic government. As E. E. Schattschneider (1942) once claimed, "modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties" (1). Even though Schattschneider wrote these words over four decades ago, this idea continues to shape the thinking of most students of political parties. As Leon Epstein (1986, 9) recently observed, there is "a preponderant scholarly commitment to the desirability, if not absolute necessity, of parties in a democratic system."

Parties, however, can promote democracy only under certain conditions. And perhaps the most important condition is that parties must be *responsible* for governmental policy. In this way, voters know the parties, their positions on issues, and what they have accomplished in office. With this information, voters can reward good policies and punish bad ones. In the absence of responsible parties, Fiorina (1980, 26) argues that "citizens can only guess at who deserves their support," which, of course, strikes at the very heart of the democratic process.

But creating "responsible" parties is not easy. Parties and their leaders, by nature, want to dodge the blame for failures while claiming the credit for successes. Thus, parties will not agree voluntarily to act responsibly. Scholars, however, generally concur on how to avoid this trap. Namely, political parties must be internally cohesive (see, for instance, Schattschneider 1942; Ranney 1951; Fiorina 1980; Epstein 1986). Such parties screen and select candidates for the nomination. They also have the resources to control party members to ensure that they support the party's cause. These characteristics allow the party to speak with a single, unified voice. Under such conditions voters can hold parties accountable for their actions because they are able to identify each party with a set of political leaders and a certain governmental

program. And because parties desire political office, accountability provides the incentive for them to meet the demands of the electorate.

This argument hinges on an important assumption; namely, that competition between the cohesive parties provides a sufficient incentive for them to be responsive to the needs of voters.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we challenge that assumption. Although interparty competition is a necessary condition for parties to serve the electorate's interests, it is not sufficient. We demonstrate through the use of the Prisoner's Dilemma that one requirement for parties (in our two-party system) to meet the needs of voters is *intraparty* competition.

This view is unorthodox. Competition within the parties is usually thought of as a stumbling block to democratic control (Wilson 1962; Ranney 1951, 1975; Schattschneider 1942; Key 1956; Caesar 1979, 1982; Polsby 1983; Epstein 1986).<sup>2</sup> Such competition, scholars contend, prevents parties from speaking with a single voice, thereby undermining voters' ability to hold them accountable for their actions. Further, internal competition diverts a party's energy from the implementation of its policies. As Wilson (1962) once observed, politics is war and dissension within the party, like dissension within an army, detracts from its warmaking ability.

We do not dispute the idea that intraparty competition has potentially harmful effects. But we argue that the possible harm is much less than the probable good. For without intraparty competition, cohesive parties will tend to collude with one another in an effort to promote their own interests at the expense of the public's.

#### APPLYING THE PRISONER'S DILEMMA

The original Prisoner's Dilemma, as one may recall, consists of two jailed players who are placed in separate rooms.<sup>3</sup> At the time of their arrest, the police lack sufficient evidence to convict them of the most serious crime for which they are suspected. Therefore, unless one of them confesses, each player will be sentenced to just one year in jail. The police and prosecuting

<sup>1</sup> Strictly speaking, the competition between parties did not serve the interests of *all* voters. The elected party, for instance, generally represents those citizens that voted for it (and those who may support the party in future elections). We are assuming, however, that in the long run the good of the whole society is best served by promoting the interests of the majority of voters, subject to constitutional constraints for the protection of minorities.

<sup>2</sup> There are, of course, some scholars who see merit in an "open" nominating process (see, for instance, Ware 1979; Crotty 1983). But these kind of arguments generally call for intraparty democracy, not intraparty competition. As one shall see, we are not arguing for democratizing the party organization but instead contend that there should be free and open competition for the nomination—something which primaries can foster.

<sup>3</sup> Much, of course, has been written on the Prisoner's Dilemma. Some of the best work on the subject includes Rapoport (1965), Taylor (1976), Hardin (1982), and Axelrod (1984).

attorney, realizing the situation, offer each player a deal: "If you alone confess, we will set you free while your partner goes to jail for ten years. There is, however, a catch. If you both confess, each of you will serve six years in jail." The dilemma facing the prisoners is whether to confess their mutual crime or remain silent.

The problem for the prisoners is that confessing is the best *individual* strategy even though it is the worst *collective* strategy. A player faces a much longer sentence—ten years—if he remains silent and the other confesses, but no sentence at all if he confesses and the other remains quiet. As long as the player has no opportunity to influence his counterpart's strategy, he or she is always better off confessing. Self-interested players realize this payoff structure, and thus confess, producing the worst, combined result from the prisoners' perspective and worse individually than if both had remained silent.

The logic of this game provides a simple but powerful scheme to model the behavior of political parties.<sup>4</sup> First, the Prisoner's Dilemma provides a way to study how duopolistic systems create arrangements, tacit and expressed, between the two participants, making it a useful framework for investigating the behavior of parties in a two-party system. Second, the Prisoner's Dilemma has proven invaluable for examining many collective action problems. And, as we shall see, parties are also faced with a collective action problem, suggesting that the Prisoner's Dilemma should be able to shed light on possible interactions between these organizations.<sup>5</sup>

The original two-by-two prisoners' game can be transformed to represent the classic argument about how interparty competition provides sufficient incentive for parties to be responsive to the needs of the electorate. As one might expect, parties represent the prisoners in this game. We assume that the two parties are cohesive teams that each speak with a unified voice. Under this definition, party leaders, for instance, control the nominating process and possess the resources to discipline members of the party. This conception draws its intellectual support from the advocates of responsible parties who want these organizations, as Epstein (1986, 31) observes, to be "strong and cohesive . . . each offering the electorate policy commitments

<sup>4</sup> We are not the first to make this connection. Ferejohn and Noll (1978) borrowed the logic of the Prisoner's Dilemma to model how parties compete with each other during the course of a campaign.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, not all collective action problems can be represented by the Prisoner's Dilemma. There are other games like Coordination games and Assurance games (see Sen 1967; Taylor 1976; Elster 1979; Hardin 1982; Snidal 1985). This particular collective action problem can be modeled with the Prisoner's Dilemma because, as we shall see, the actors in this new game have an incentive to defect. In the other two games, the preferred outcome is dual cooperation (see Hardin 1982, 151; Snidal 1985, 931, and Elster 1979, 20).

which it could fulfill after winning government offices." Obviously, parties in the United States fall short of this ideal. But we adopt this particular definition so as to assess the logic of those who espouse both the benefits of interparty competition and the costs of intraparty competition.

A second assumption concerns the goals of these cohesive parties. Where the players' goal in the Prisoner's Dilemma is to minimize their time in jail, the parties' goal in this new game is, we assume, to maximize their political benefits.<sup>6</sup> By "benefits," we mean a number of things. One kind of benefit would be providing jobs and favors to individuals and interest groups, which is normally associated with the notion of spoils. Note that "spoils" for our purposes goes beyond just providing patronage to friends and supporters. It also includes such things as awarding lucrative government contracts to favored firms. Given the amount of money spent by the local, state, and national governments, these are important "benefits" for parties.

A second kind of benefit can be the pursuit of certain policies. These policies can range from those motivated by narrow self-interest to those that seek to promote the common good (Schlesinger 1975). Policies that can be labeled "narrow self-interest" might be laws designed to provide tax breaks to industries that contribute money to the party's treasury. It might also include the building of new highways, which would, of course, provide numerous opportunities for the parties to award contracts to loyal supporters. Other policies may promote the common good, like health care legislation or laws designed to curb corporate polluters. But these policies are pursued by the parties because of their own preferences, not because they are seeking to serve the wishes of the public. Parties in our game, therefore, can possess policy objectives.<sup>7</sup>

Note that the parties' pursuit of these "benefits" also helps them secure public office.<sup>8</sup> By providing the kinds of benefits described above to voters, to party workers and to financial contributors, parties are able to increase their chances of winning political office. That is, parties should be able to

<sup>6</sup> There are, of course, other assumptions one might want to make about the goals of parties (see, for instance, Wittman 1973, 1983; Schlesinger 1975; Chappell and Keech 1986; Herrera 1989). The most obvious alternative is that parties seek to maximize votes. If one makes that assumption, then, by definition, interparty competition provides a sufficient incentive for parties to pursue the interests of the majority. Otherwise, the parties are unable to secure what they seek—votes (Wittman 1973).

<sup>7</sup> In most discussions of policy-motivated parties, it is generally assumed that the particular policies are designed to benefit at least parts of the larger society. But there is no reason to adopt such a position. It is quite possible that some policies are motivated by the narrow self-interest of politicians.

<sup>8</sup> One can also think of holding office as a benefit in and of itself. That is, parties can have the prestige of holding office. As Downs (1957, 28) argued, parties seek the "income, *prestige* and power which comes from being in office" (our emphasis).

build large war chests for the campaign, build a grass roots organization and at the same time, throw out a few policies to placate the mass electorate. An important point is that parties in our game are not pursuing a single elective office. In the United States, there are numerous political offices—435 in the House of Representatives, one hundred in the Senate, and far more at the state and local levels—for the parties to win. Thus, there can be more than one winner in the American political system, allowing parties to share in its benefits.

There is one additional actor in the Prisoner's Dilemma that has particular relevance for our game: Society. In many uses of the Prisoner's Dilemma, "society" has no explicit role. In the field of International Relations, for instance, the prisoners (i.e., sovereign states) are the central actors (see, for instance, Oye 1986). These prisoners can be thought of as representing the interests of society, since they are presumably acting on behalf of the people in their nations.

In the original game, however, it is the district attorney and the police who represent the interests of society. Since the prisoners violated the law, the citizens who compose society have a stake in putting these individuals behind bars. Thus, when the district attorney and the police create the conditions to encourage defection, they are in fact promoting the interests of the citizenry. These interests, of course, are very different than those of the prisoners. Society benefits when both prisoners "defect," because it allows for sentencing that, under the circumstances, best reflects the severity of their mutual crime. The least preferred outcome of the citizenry is dual cooperation where the prisoners minimize their time behind bars and the proof of their full crime is never established. Similarly, society in our election game has a substantial stake in formulating the context in which political parties compete. And, just as society's interests conflict with the prisoners', society's interests are at odds with the interests of the parties. The Prisoner's Dilemma thus illustrates the battle between the parties' interests and society's interests.

Two examples may clarify our point. First, suppose that voters oppose graft. Yet benefit-seeking parties, as noted above, want to engage in graft. If the parties pursue graft, then their interests are served at the expense of the public's. If, however, they minimize graft, the parties are serving the public's interests at the expense of their interests. The next example is more subtle. Suppose a majority of voters want governmental support for agriculture. If a party pushes for subsidies for farmers in response to this preference, then it is serving the interests of society. But suppose, instead, that the parties seize on this preference and enact an excessive amount of subsidies for farmers (which would lead to higher taxes to fund these additional subsidies). On the one hand, the parties could claim responsiveness to the public's wishes. But

at the same time, the parties could have allocated so much extra money to agricultural interests that they have lots of additional benefits to allocate to their respective supporters. In this case, the parties are serving their interests at the expense of the public's interests. In short, the Prisoner's Dilemma highlights the clash between the interests of society and the interests of the parties, making it a useful framework to study the effects of interparty competition.

#### PLAYING THE GAME

Like the players in the Prisoner's Dilemma, party leaders have two possible strategies to secure their goals. First, parties may "cooperate." Or to use the prisoners' phrase, the parties "remain silent." Under this strategy, parties do not compete vigorously with their opponent in the general election. This lack of competition can cut at least two ways. First, parties will ignore many of the issues that matter most to the public. Or as Ferejohn and Noll (1978, 504) write, parties "may find it in their interest to conspire not to campaign on the dominant platform." So, for instance, in the pre-Civil War era, the parties often ducked the heated issue of slavery (see Riker 1982; Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus 1984). A second and related way the lack of competition cuts is that the parties will not point out the weaknesses of their opponent's platform or previous accomplishments. Since each party under the dual cooperation scenario is living in a "glass house," neither has an incentive to throw "stones."

The absence of genuine competition allows the parties to evade oversight by the electorate, giving them latitude to further their own interests. Note that these collusive parties may test each other from time to time, but these tests would be more "bark" than "bite." In such cases, the parties, as Wittman (1973, 497) contends, "compete only in relatively unimportant areas," hoping to avoid offering "a choice to voters on more fundamental questions."

The mechanics of this cooperation could range from actual sharing of power to where one party establishes itself as the stronger through a series of electoral victories. In the latter case, the weaker party would go along with the status quo—toning down its criticisms, avoiding reform-oriented candidates—in exchange for certain policy and spoils-type concessions. Examples of this kind of collusion might be found in the old urban political machines where the minority party only offered token opposition in an effort to secure a small share of the spoils (see, for instance, Rakove 1975). In the former case, the two parties might forge a set of "understandings," allowing them to divide the benefits of government relatively evenly. These understandings could take the form of explicit collusion between the parties or more tacit agreements between them. This relatively equal sharing is the more likely



scenario at the federal and state level, given the multitude of offices available and the separation of powers.

An important point is that these benefit-seeking parties will not be dividing a fixed pie. That is, mutual cooperation allows the parties to expand the available political benefits to both of them. So, for instance, the parties can agree to spend a great deal of money on a new weapons system that is marginal to national defense. The contracts to build the system can then be shared among the two parties, providing a tangible payoff to this cooperation. In a competitive arrangement, however, this system might not be funded, lessening the available benefits to both sides. Another form of cooperation might be passing laws that limit the access of third parties to the ballot, as the parties did in the late 1890s (see Rosenstone et al. 1984), or by establishing a system of campaign funding that channels far more funds to incumbents than to challengers, as the current arrangement for congressional elections permits. In this way, the parties by working together increase their chances of maintaining access to the political benefits of government.

The second strategy for the self-interested parties in our game is "defection." Or using the terms of the original Prisoner's Dilemma, parties "confess." Under this strategy, each organization tries to offer the best possible government. By "best possible" government, we mean that parties adopt policies designed to meet the preferences of the electorate. So, for instance, parties reduce their own benefits in an effort to gain more public support on election day. This reduction in benefits occurs at the narrow, spoils level where the parties cut patronage and unnecessary government contracts. The result is a more efficient government budget that makes better use of each tax dollar.

This competition also encourages responsiveness at the broader policy level. Parties will tailor their platforms to reflect the preferences of the public. Moreover, parties will promote and publicize these platforms during the campaign and will commit themselves as best they can to adhere to those platforms once in office. These propaganda efforts focus both on highlighting their views on issues and the problems with their opponents' positions on issues. Finally, once elected, the winning party tries to implement these platforms into law. If the party does not implement them or they fail, the opposition will be quick to point these problems out in the next election. Thus, the parties are engaged in a series of price wars, hoping to attract a majority of voters to buy their product on election day. As a result, when both parties "defect," there are fewer political benefits for each party and the preferences of the electorate receive greater play. In short, parties serve the interests of the citizenry.

Given the alternatives of defection or cooperation, the former is the dominant strategy for the self-interested party—just as in the original Prisoner's

Dilemma. That is, no matter what the opposing party does, defection promises the best return. If, for instance, the opposing party "cooperates," defection means winning control of government and securing access to all its benefits. In fact, the public would greatly reward such defection, since it exposes the other party as corrupt. The rewards would include such things as a sweeping victory and prestige which would spill over to increased opportunities for future electoral success at all levels of government. As a result, cooperation risks failure not only in the current set of elections, but also in subsequent contests because the cooperating party's reputation will be damaged. A party will always defect, then, to score a major victory if possible and because, if the opposing party defects, the strategy of defection avoids a crushing defeat and promises at least occasional access to a base level of benefits inherent in holding office. Thus, if parties pursue their self-interest (defection), the result should be a government that tailors its goals to those of the voting majority.

Like the prisoners, benefit-maximizing parties would be much better off if they both cooperated rather than if both defected. Again, through joint cooperation, parties can reduce the level of public scrutiny of their activities and so increase their benefits compared with the scenario of dual defection. But as with the prisoners, the structure of the election game encourages the parties to pursue a strategy that undercuts their collective interests while promoting the collective interests of society. Thus, as one can see, the Prisoner's Dilemma captures the basic argument behind the view that interparty competition drives self-interested parties to serve the interests of voters. Schattschneider (1942, 60) draws an analogy that makes this point nicely:

The parties do not need laws to make them sensitive to the wishes of the voters any more than we need laws compelling merchants to please their customers. The sovereignty of the voter consists in this freedom of choice just as the sovereignty of the consumer in the economic system consists in his freedom to trade in a competitive market.

Downs (1957) provides a formal version of this argument, showing that competitive parties compete for the center of the distribution of the public's preferences. This struggle for the center means the interests of the electorate should be served.

### THE PROBLEM

Although the logic presented above appears compelling, a serious problem arises. Recall that in the original game, the prisoners are placed in separate cells and given only one chance to play the game. Under these conditions, there is much incentive to defect, as noted above. But such conditions do not apply in our election game. To begin with, parties are not given just one opportunity to play the game. Instead, parties participate in elections

again and again, iteratively.<sup>9</sup> Each election enables the parties to send signals to its opponent about its willingness to defect or cooperate, influencing each other's behavior in the next contest. Moreover, the time between the elections provides fertile soil for the parties to develop certain "understandings" about public policy or the distribution of government benefits. Indeed, every day within an election can be seen as a separate round of the election game.<sup>10</sup>

So to use the terms of the original game, the parties are situated in the same "cell" and told that they will be playing the game repeatedly. Under these more realistic conditions, the context for formulating strategy changes radically. As Hardin (1982, 145–46) writes, "it is generally agreed that players may rationally *cooperate* in iterated Prisoner's Dilemma," and "among sophisticated players, cooperation in iterated Prisoner's Dilemma may be the *norm*" (our emphasis). Snidal (1985, 930) concurs, noting that it "is now widely understood that the prospect of repeated play into the future increases the likelihood of *cooperation*" (our emphasis). Now keep in mind that a repeated Prisoner's Dilemma does not guarantee that cooperation between the players will arise (see, for instance, Ordeshook 1986). But in this particular game collusion would prove to be a very profitable strategy, given that parties would be able to use the vast resources of government to their own advantage. And with only two cohesive parties competing, it would be reasonably easy to forge agreements between the players. Obviously, cooperation need not arise in every case, but benefit-seeking parties make it a serious threat to the operation of democratic government.

In short, the logic of repeated play in the Prisoner's Dilemma has important implications for the view that interparty competition provides sufficient incentive for the parties to defect. Because leaders of political parties are, by all accounts, sophisticated players and because elections are iterative, it seems likely that party leaders would learn to cooperate to further their own interests at the expense of the public's. Thus, the ideal disciplined, cohesive

<sup>9</sup> Other scholars have argued that electoral competition can be modeled as repeated interactions between parties (see, for instance, Alesina 1988). But these previous analyses have not modeled these repeated interactions within the Prisoner's Dilemma.

<sup>10</sup> One consequence of viewing each day of an election as a separate round is that the probability of one party defecting and one party cooperating becomes exceedingly low. Suppose that two parties are entering their first election. The campaign prior to the casting of ballots will provide an opportunity for each party to indicate its willingness to cooperate or defect. If one party indicates it is willing to cooperate and the other party indicates the opposite, the latter party will have an opportunity during the campaign to correct its strategy. Suppose, on the other hand, that two parties have been cooperating for awhile and one party wants to end these agreements. Again, the party left cooperating would have time to adjust its strategy. Thus, assuming reasonably informed parties, this particular outcome should be highly unstable and short term in nature.

parties that many scholars want to have compete in general elections may systematically fail to meet the needs of the electorate—just the opposite outcome conventional wisdom predicts.

#### SOME POSSIBLE OBJECTIONS

One might argue that “cooperation,” in the sense of compromise and bipartisanship, is often a good thing—especially in a system of divided government like the United States. This argument, however, misses the thrust of our analysis. By cooperation, we mean that the parties have developed a set of understandings with each other on matters ranging from distribution of government benefits to larger issues of public policy. The defining characteristic of these understandings is that they are for the *parties'* mutual benefit, not the public's. In contrast, “compromise” is the outgrowth of the competitive struggle between the parties in some matter of public policy. The agreement that emerges is an effort by the parties to give their respective constituencies half a load instead of none. It is *not* an agreement that seeks to line the parties' pockets at the expense of the public.

A second possible objection is that parties have more than two strategies (cooperation or defection) available to them. One can think of cooperation-defection as a continuum, not a dichotomy as we assume. There are in fact a lot of small steps within the “cooperation” strategy. Parties might, for instance, cooperate just on minor issues, like providing a few extra jobs for friends and relatives. Such collusion would have minimal effects on the operation of government. But that, of course, is just the tip of the iceberg, since parties could also collude together to alter important legislation, tailoring it to their own preferences. Cooperation, in short, may well take on a range of values.

Defection is different. In its pure form defection requires parties to compete with each other on *all* issues, ranging from patronage to tax policy. Thus, while cooperation can vary in degree, defection is easier to identify. For our purposes, therefore, any cooperation detracts from the pursuit of the public interest and thus, we place it under one general heading. Thinking of the matter this way suggests that the use of a dichotomy may be reasonable.

Two other factors make this assumption acceptable. First, we think of this choice as a fundamental one that faces all parties. That is, the parties must ask themselves do they want to compete with the opposing party or do they want to develop a set of understandings with the opposing party. These understandings, as noted above, can vary quite a bit, but they all involve collusion. Thus, our assumption about the two strategies perhaps deals with the very first question a party must ask itself. The answer to this question, in turn, alters the kinds of actions undertaken by the party. Second, even

though cooperation may start out small, the logic of our analysis indicates that it will tend to get worse. So, once parties establish some collusive arrangements, there will be a tendency to develop additional ones as the trust between the parties grows. Thus, given the iterative play between parties, cooperation is not likely to remain minor for very long.

One might also take issue with our analysis by arguing that there are checks on the parties that should still make defection the dominant strategy for disciplined parties, even in iterative play. First, if the two parties cooperate, third parties could emerge to challenge that collusive arrangement. The threat of a third party might encourage the leadership of the two parties to defect. But election laws in the United States discourage third parties from mounting serious challenges (Rae 1971; Mazmanian 1974; Rosenstone et al. 1984). The Electoral College, for instance, hinders the efforts of third parties, because a party needs only a plurality of ballots cast to gain all the electoral votes for a state. Consequently, it is far from clear that third parties provide enough of a threat to encourage self-interested parties to opt for the strategy of defection. Of course, even if a third party did take hold, its leadership might also see the merits of cooperation.

A second check is the existence of a free and critical press that could provide a deterrent to cooperative parties. If parties enter into corrupt arrangements, the press could bring these arrangements to the attention of the public. Such adverse coverage would damage the parties, forcing them to abandon such practices. But to the extent that cooperation insulates the parties from the need to respond to majority opinion, the response of the press—notifying the public—may be ineffective by definition. Further, a free press existed during the reigns of many political bosses in American cities, yet these regimes were able to further their own interests at the expense of the public's (see, for instance, Rakove 1974; McKean 1940). Thus, the existence of a free press does not guarantee that parties will compete with each other. The press probably would, however, deter blatantly collusive practices by the parties, leaving the parties ample room to cooperate in other ways—by, for example, subtly increasing the number of government jobs, providing government contracts to friends, supplying tax breaks to favored groups, and tacitly establishing certain sacred cows protected from normal policy bargaining.

In short, the possible threat of third parties and the existence of a free press might prevent total and open collusion among disciplined parties.<sup>11</sup> But some pursuit of the parties' interests rather than the voters' interests remains likely to occur, given the logic of the Prisoner's Dilemma.

<sup>11</sup> Wittman (1973, 498), in fact, argues that while "there may be explicit agreements . . . it is much more likely that collusion is *implicit*" (our emphasis).

## A SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM

Given this argument, we need to consider ways to discourage cooperation between the parties. In a relatively closed two-party system, like the United States, *intraparty* competition, whereby party members choose among competing candidates for the nomination, offers a solution to this problem. With internal party competition, politicians should shy away from cooperating. Collusive activities between the two parties would open the door for insurgent candidates to mount effective challenges against the current leadership in the parties, since these new factions could blow the whistle on them. That is, insurgents could raise issues that could lure the rank and file into their camp. So, for instance, if the parties were ducking concerns about health care or education, an insurgent organization could highlight that fact, offering its own positions on these ignored issues. Also, if the existing leadership of the party had spent excessive amounts of money on pet projects, these rival organizations could bring that practice to the attention of voters. Under such conditions, new players in the game would have an excellent opportunity to win the nomination since the citizens would now be aware of the unresponsive actions of the existing leadership. The public, as a result, would be better off, since this new faction will be responsive to the electorate's preferences.

Under such conditions, the current party leaders should defect to majority-oriented government. Otherwise, they risk losing control of the party, which would ensure that they are denied access to the political benefits they seek. Thus, the fear of being unseated as the leaders of the party would keep these actors responsive to the public.

Intraparty competition can, of course, take a number of forms. It can range from allowing factions to compete in a closed convention of party regulars to a system of direct primaries that permits the mass electorate to choose candidates. Our argument does not spell out exactly what form the competition should take. It does, however, specify two conditions of that competition. First, it must be open to any faction that wants to mount a campaign against the existing leadership. By "open," we mean that there are no significant barriers that prevent individuals from attempting to organize an effort to secure the nomination. The second condition is that the rank and file should be able to participate in the process. If participation is limited to just party regulars, for instance, it is possible that the current party leadership could buy off the party regulars, ensuring that they support the existing leadership regardless of the alternatives presented. In contrast, widespread participation prevents the party leadership from being able to maintain their positions by buying off a small group.

Without these two conditions, existing factions could cut deals with each other, making intraparty competition face the same problems as interparty

competition. But with a nominating system that is open to challenges and that permits participation by the rank and file, new factions could expose collusion. And as long as one assumes that politicians seek benefits, there should always be some set of individuals willing to compete for control of the party and hence possible access to those benefits. What's more, some of these individuals are likely to be one-time players, who will fade from view if they fail to succeed in their challenge to the party leaders. These one-time players will restore much of the dynamic of the single play prisoners' dilemma to the electoral game. The constant threat of new factions should keep the leadership from cooperating with the opposing party (or other, existing factions within the party).

Interestingly, when progressives were calling for the adoption of the direct primary around the turn of the century, they were trying to break the hold the existing leadership of both parties had on government. They surely did not think about the Prisoner's Dilemma, but they knew that the leaderships of the two parties were working together on many matters and they wanted to sever those arrangements. And the direct primary, they believed, offered one way to end those corrupt practices.

As we know, the progressives did "succeed," enacting laws that established the direct primary in many states. While that change was a move in the right direction, it still did not meet the requirements we set out above. That is, there still was not free and open competition. The party leadership still maintained a good deal of control over the process. At the presidential level, for instance, primaries often elected uncommitted delegates that were still under the control of the party leaders (Davis 1980). So in 1912 when Roosevelt rolled to a series of victories in the Republican presidential primaries, he still lost on the first ballot to William Howard Taft. Of course, the late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed another round of reforms that has transformed the presidential nominating system (Crotty and Jackson 1985; Ceasar 1979, 1982; Polsby 1983). But even with these most recent changes, the presidential nominating system still does not allow free and open competition among the candidates in key respects. Potential nominees competing in presidential primaries, for instance, must face hurdles ranging from the raising of campaign funds to securing attention from members of the news media.

The purpose of this essay is not, however, to advocate or to evaluate any particular reform for the presidential nominating system. Rather, our point is that, to the extent that these and other changes would increase the competitiveness of the selection process, they would serve an important role in breaking down (or helping to prevent) cooperative relationships between the two parties. Thus, simply increasing the number of primaries would not solve this dilemma. Other changes like providing public financing for

potential nominees or easing the access to the primary ballot would also be important.

With genuine open competition for the nomination, the party becomes more a process than an organization. The party's main role would be to provide a system of nominations through which contending factions could compete fairly for the votes of a mass electorate.<sup>12</sup> The victors in this process would then carry the party label into the general election. This label would have meaning, because the winning faction should possess the most support among the party's membership.<sup>13</sup> This description of the party has much in common with reality, since primaries and caucuses dominate the political landscape of the United States. Many scholars, of course, would like to see the single disciplined party become "reality," but our analysis suggests that such efforts are misplaced.

#### CONSEQUENCES OF INTRAPARTY COMPETITION

The outcome yielded by the iterated Prisoner's Dilemma presents a problem. If parties face only interparty competition, we risk collusion that undermines responsive government. On the other hand, allowing intraparty competition may also exact a price. First, because the leadership of the party may change in response to these internal struggles, voters may not be able to hold parties responsible for the success (or failure) of governmental policy. Scholars generally agree that factionalism within a party may undercut its ability to act responsibly (see, for instance, Schattschneider 1942; Ranney 1951; Wilson 1962; Fiorina 1980; Epstein 1986). A second problem with internal competition is that the victor may be unrepresentative of the public's views. Intraparty competition may drive the parties away from the "middle ground on which [they] must stand if they are to appeal successfully for those crucial votes which are not committed to either extreme" (Wilson 1962, 347–48). Finally, intraparty competition can weaken the party as a whole, lessening its ability to compete effectively in the general election.

Although these problems of intraparty competition are potentially serious, they are not compelling. First, it is unclear whether Wilson and others are correct in suggesting that intraparty competition encourages the nomination

<sup>12</sup> We are being vague about what constitutes a "mass" electorate. Some readers, for instance, might think we are entering the debate over "open" and "closed" primaries. We, however, have no particular preference, since in either case the electorate will be large enough to prevent the leadership from buying off the eligible participants.

<sup>13</sup> Great care would have to be given to ensure that the victor of the intraparty competition does in fact possess the most support. Polsby (1983), for instance, notes the many hurdles in selecting a candidate with widespread support when a large number of contenders compete for the nomination. See Geer (1989) for one strategy that may increase the chances of selecting nominees with broad support.



of candidates outside the party's mainstream. The problem with determining the accuracy of this claim is that it is unclear what constitutes a "representative" candidate. This is a thorny issue, because it turns largely on whom one thinks *should* be represented by the candidate. Should it be party workers? financial contributors to the party? citizens who regularly vote for the party? individuals who self-identify with the party? The answer is far from clear. For instance, using one definition of party members, Lingle (1981) provides evidence that primaries do encourage the selection of unrepresentative candidates. Geer (1988), on the other hand, uses an alternative conception of party members and finds little evidence that primaries yield such candidates. So concluding whether intraparty competition encourages the selection of "unrepresentative" candidates would hinge in large part on whom you think should be represented by these nominees, which is very much a normative issue.

The second problem facing intraparty competition involves the possibility that infighting may weaken the parties' effort in the general election. There is a growing literature on the effects of divisive battles for the nomination (see, for instance, Kenney and Rice 1987; Born 1981). It remains unclear, however, whether divisive struggles harm a party's chance in the general election (Kenney 1988; Westlye 1985). Even if they do, both parties will be facing the same handicap, which should have the effect of evening the odds. Of course, in a particular election one party may face an internal battle while the other party is spared such a fight. But a party that avoids an internal struggle may be representing the interests of its membership better than the party that faces a bitter struggle for the nomination. If so, divisive battles for the nomination may simply serve as a proxy for whether the current leadership has successfully met the needs of its following.

The most serious objection involves the claim that intraparty competition undermines party cohesion, which limits the ability of the electorate to hold parties accountable for their actions in office. But our analysis, as noted above, suggests only that the party's nominating system be *open* to challenges from organizations outside the current party leadership. The factions competing for the nominations do not need to be organized democratically. Therefore, internally cohesive factions rather than internally cohesive parties could exist. Potentially, then, a disciplined bloc could gain control of a party by winning a primary (or series of primaries). That organization could, in turn, provide the benefits usually attributed to internal cohesion. Consequently, internal party competition need not prevent the public from reaping some of the rewards of a disciplined organization.

Moreover, these factions may only differ on one or two issues, which would still allow the electorate to hold the party accountable on other matters of policy. Assume, for instance, that a candidate organizes a group to seize control of a party because the current leadership had been serving its

own interests more than the public's. This new group, if nominated, will differ from the current leadership on some issues, like inefficient use of public funds, but on other issues there will be general agreement. Thus, internal competition permits *partial* accountability.

Interestingly, a historical example lends credence to our contentions. In this case, intraparty competition shattered a system of spoils and benefits erected by two colluding parties in North Dakota. Around the turn of the century, the state government of North Dakota was run by banking, railroad, and shipping interests with the cooperation of *both* Democrats and Republicans. These politicians received their share of patronage and graft. More importantly, at the policy level, the farmers, who made up nearly 70% of the state, were losing a substantial proportion of their income to the business interests. The business community controlled the weighing, grading, storing, and shipping of the farmer's produce. This monopoly gave rise to business's exploitation of the agricultural sector.

Farmers were aware of their situation, but they did little to combat it until Arthur Townley, a bankrupt farmer, organized an insurgent faction—the Non-Partisan League (NPL). The NPL was the political scientists' ideal of a disciplined organization. It had a detailed program of reform, intensely motivated workers, and a leader with great political acumen. But because North Dakota had a system of primaries that provided access to the nominations for various state offices, the NPL did not face the uphill battle of a third-party bid. Instead, the organization used these primaries to generate a wave of popular support that allowed it to capture control of the state government within three years. Once in office, the NPL enacted its program of government to protect the farmers' interests. Although the NPL took advantage of North Dakota's open system of nominations, the organization was not internally democratic. Townley maintained complete control.<sup>14</sup>

This case lends support to our argument in two ways. First, and most importantly, this example shows that intraparty competition can provide a way to force parties to be responsive to the majority's wishes. Second, as suggested above, competition within the parties does not prevent the public from reaping the benefits of organizational discipline.

## CONCLUSION

When two sophisticated parties compete against one another, iteratively, they should learn to cooperate with each other. As a result, theories that contend that competition in general elections between two parties generates responsiveness to majority opinion are incomplete. Competition between

<sup>14</sup> See Morlan (1955) *Political Prairie Fire* for a detailed and interesting account of the Non-Partisan League. All information we have cited comes from this source.

parties is a necessary, but insufficient, condition for this result.<sup>15</sup> Schumpeter (1950) once contended that "the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (269). The argument in this essay indicates that these competitive struggles should not only be conducted between parties, but also within them if we want to promote the electorate's interests.

This conclusion has important implications for politics. First, it suggests that in a relatively closed two-party system like the United States, the nominating system must be open to challenges from competing factions. Without such an arrangement, we risk collusion between the parties at various levels of government. This conclusion does not necessarily mean that the nominating system must be dominated by direct primaries. But the arrangement should be designed so as to allow insurgent organizations an opportunity to compete freely for support of the party's rank and file, for which the direct primary is well-suited. This argument, consequently, provides theoretical support for reliance on primaries as devices to promote the interests of the public.<sup>16</sup>

This argument about the merits of intraparty competition assumes even greater importance in today's political scene, because of changes in the organization of parties. The original purpose of the direct primary was to promote intraparty *democracy*. Progressives, like Robert LaFollette and Woodrow Wilson, who advocated this device felt that it would wrestle power from corrupt political bosses and foster democratic control of the party. Their argument assumed, however, that there is one organization and that candidates compete within it for the nomination. But today there is no longer a single organization for the party. Instead, contenders build their own organizations to run for office (see, for example, Polsby 1983; Epstein 1986; Jewell and Olson 1988). Therefore, intraparty *democracy*, as reformers originally envisioned, may no longer be possible. But with candidate-centered organizations, intraparty *competition* is still possible. Therefore, our argument provides not only a defense for the use of the direct primary, but also for the use of this device in an era of candidate-centered politics.

A final implication of this paper involves how political parties promote

<sup>15</sup> One might ask whether the logic of this argument indicates that intraparty competition is a sufficient condition for parties to promote the majority's interest, eliminating the need for interparty competition. Intraparty competition is *not* sufficient unless there is just one nominating process that provides the entire electorate access to the selection of candidates. Such a scenario is theoretically possible, but not in a *two* party system. Thus, there is still a need for interparty competition.

<sup>16</sup> It also provides support for changes in the rules of primaries that might make competition more open, like the public funding of candidates or the elimination of laws that make access to the ballot difficult.

voters' interests. Most of the literature has focused on the need for *interparty* competition. Very little has been written suggesting that *intraparty* competition may be one of the prerequisites for parties to serve the needs of the electorate. Yet this analysis suggests that internal struggles are necessary to ensure that parties will be responsive to voters. There have been periodic calls for intraparty democracy (see, for instance, APSA 1950; Wares 1979), but these arguments seek to democratize the party organization. In contrast, this essay shows that a key ingredient for majority rule is having an open nominating system that permits genuine intraparty competition—a new twist in the long discussed relationship between democracy and political parties.

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