**Reading One:**
**Is a Crowded Field of Presidential Candidates Good or Bad?**

A total of 27 Democrats and 3 Republicans have at some point declared their candidacy for the 2020 presidential race. At the first official Democratic debate in the summer of 2019, 20 candidates appeared on stage over the course of two nights. By the mid-October debate, that number had dwindled to 12 candidates on stage, but others who were not included stayed in the race, keeping the field of hopefuls unusually large.

So how many candidates is too many? Does our current primary system make for a stronger or weaker democracy?

Many commentators see a crowded field of candidates as a natural outgrowth of positive changes in the electoral process. In a June 2019 article in Time magazine, staff writer Olivia B. Wazman laid out some historical reasons why there are so many presidential candidates in the running this year. She wrote:

> The potential for having so many candidates in contention is the result of party reforms in the early 1970s. Those changes were made after Americans took to the streets when Hubert Humphrey became the Democratic nominee at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago without having campaigned in any primary races.
>
> "Primaries in the old system were few and far between," says Elaine Kamarck, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution and author of Primary Politics: Everything You Need to Know about How America Nominates Its Presidential Candidates. When primary elections did happen, they were "beauty contests" used by the party to test electability, but were separate from the selection of a state's delegates to the party's nominating convention. "The old nominating system was controlled ultimately by elected officials and party officers of the Democratic party," sitting down with the governor in a smoke-filled room. That changed for Democrats between 1972 and 1976, as primaries became the dominant way of determining delegates and thus nominating the candidates….
>
> In the 1976 election to replace Gerald Ford, who had become President upon Richard Nixon's resignation, the impact of the change was clear: 17 Democrats ran for President, by one count….
>
> The 1976 election showed Americans that, thanks to the primary system, someone from outside Washington could win the whole thing — a lesson reinforced in 2016 with President Trump's victory. That year [1976] also showed how much things can change before Election Day. There wasn't a clear front runner, but favorites included Arizona Congressman Mo Udall and Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson from Washington state. "The overall caution I take from 1976 is that people favored now may not be in that position when the voting starts," says Kyle Kondik, the Managing Editor of Sabato's Crystal Ball at the University of Virginia Center for Politics.
> https://time.com/5607309/democratic-primaries-with-most-candidates/

Some political observers argue that a crowded field of candidates is a good thing. It allows otherwise unknown people and issues to gain more traction. For example, when Barack Obama began his campaign in 2007, he was a little-known contender who was not considered to have a great chance of winning. Both Obama and Trump emerged from crowded fields and ended up winning the presidency.

Sometimes candidates who don't make it to the finish line can still play an important role in shining a spotlight on issues that might otherwise be overlooked. For example, former Washington Governor Jay Inslee, a 2020 Democratic presidential candidate who dropped out of the race in August, ran as the climate change candidate. He helped make climate an important issue in the current election cycle. A primary is a chance for members of a political party to debate what they think is most important and what direction they want to move in. A crowded primary can encourage an active debate.

Finally, the fact that candidates have to compete in a hotly-contested race can make them more responsive to the demands of grassroots groups, whom candidates feel they must win over. In contrast, when a presumptive favorite is prematurely handed a party nomination, they may not feel pressure to engage with these constituencies.

But a crowded primary field can also have negatives. At some point a large number of candidates jostling to make themselves heard begins to resemble a circus more than an effective process to determine the next leader of the country. In a December 2018 article in Vox, senior correspondent Matthew Yglesias captured this feeling of exhaustion, writing, "The more people get in, the more plausible any scenario starts to seem. So even more people get in! It might never end."

Another problem is that members of the same party can end up spending a lot of time and energy attacking one another in order to pull ahead in the polls. A group of candidates that might be in agreement with one another on many issues end up fixating on small differences, rather than coming together to take on a candidate from a rival party who may fundamentally oppose their views. In some cases, attacks made in the primary are adopted by an opposing party in the general election, and the early infighting ends up costing the party a chance to win power.

In a May 2019 article in The Conversation, Hans J. G. Hassell, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Florida State University, elaborates on the issue of divisiveness. He argues that the presence of political divisions within a party can create a vicious cycle: Differences of opinion motivate a greater number of candidates to run, and then once a larger number of contenders are in the race, they end up amplifying these differences—sometimes to the detriment of their own party. Hassell writes:

> Political parties are not monolithic organizations. Parties consist of a network of groups with different policy interests who work together.
>
> For example, within the Democratic Party there are labor organizations, environmentalists, and civil rights groups, each with different priorities. Each group would ideally prefer a candidate who will champion their ideas and strongly support their policy preferences.

But a primary filled with many candidates who attack one another risks harming the eventual nominee's standing with voters.

Likewise, these divisive primaries may cause supporters of a candidate who fails to win the nomination to withhold their support of the nominee….

In previous election cycles, where the average number of candidates who declared their candidacy and campaigned actively through the first primaries and caucuses was much smaller, these groups have worked together effectively to stand behind one candidate…. As my research shows, unified parties are able to discourage candidates from running or encourage them to drop out. They do this by making it difficult for the candidates they don't prefer to acquire the vital electoral resources that are necessary to win the nomination: media coverage, campaign funds and quality campaign staff….

While the number of candidates running for president in 2020 may be unprecedented, a crowded debate stage is unlikely to be a strange sight in the future. The divisions within parties and the availability of money and media coverage outside of the traditional party network mean that potential candidates will continue to see – and take – opportunities where previously they did not.

https://theconversation.com/why-are-there-so-many-candidates-for-president-116571

Whether we feel that packed primary stages are positive or negative, they are unlikely to disappear anytime soon. The primary elections of 2020 may well be underway before clarity about who will remain standing starts to emerge.
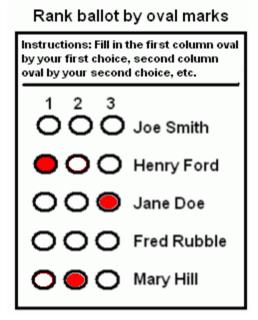
**For Discussion:**

1.  How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?

2.  What are some arguments in favor of a crowded primary field? What are some arguments against it?

3.  According to the reading, what does a crowded primary field say about the state of a political party?

4.  What do you think? Is it good that so many candidates are running, or would you rather see a smaller field?

5.  If you were working in a Democratic presidential campaign right now, what would you do to help put your candidate ahead of the pack?

## Is Ranked Choice Voting a Better Approach?

In a ranked choice system, voters rank the candidates for a given office by preference on their ballots. A typical process is as follows:

1. If a candidate wins an outright majority of first-preference votes (i.e., 50 percent plus one), he or she will be declared the winner.

2. If, on the other hand, no candidates win an outright majority of first-preference votes, the candidate with the fewest first-preference votes is eliminated.

3. All first-preference votes for the failed candidate are eliminated, lifting the second-preference choices indicated on those ballots.

5. A new tally is conducted to determine whether any candidate has won an outright majority of the adjusted voters. (Unlike other kinds of "runoff elections," this does not require organizing another round of balloting. Vote counters already have voters' rankings.)

6. The process is repeated until a candidate wins a majority of votes cast.

**Rank ballot by oval marks**

Instructions: Fill in the first column oval by your first choice, second column oval by your second choice, etc.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | |
|---|---|---|---|
| ○ | ○ | ○ | Joe Smith |
| ● | ○ | ○ | Henry Ford |
| ○ | ○ | ● | Jane Doe |
| ○ | ○ | ○ | Fred Rubble |
| ○ | ● | ○ | Mary Hill |

## Reading Two:
## What are the Pros & Cons of Ranked Choice Voting?

The nonprofit organization FairVote advocates for a ranked choice voting system. According to FairVote, the process has these advantages:

**Promotes majority support.** Under our current "winner-take-all" system of voting, candidates are often elected to office despite being opposed by most voters. With ranked choice voting, if no candidate has more than half the vote in first-choices, candidates finishing last are eliminated round-by-round in an instant runoff until two candidates are left. The winning candidate will be the one with majority support when matched against the other.

**Discourages negative campaigning**. Ranked choice voting elections discourage "mud-slinging" by candidates – because every candidate hopes to be a second or third choice of voters who support opposing candidates. A Rutgers University poll of voters in seven cities with ranked choice voting found that voters report friendlier campaigns and was supported by a majority of voters in those cities.

**Provides more choice for voters**.  Political parties sometimes try to avoid "vote splitting" among multiple primary candidates by discouraging challengers from running. They can do this through restrictive ballot access laws or just by shaming candidates into staying out of the race. Ranked choice voting allows more than two candidates to compete without fear of splitting the vote.

**Promotes reflective representation**. Compared to winner-take-all elections, ranked choice voting allows more diverse groups of voters to elect candidates of choice. A report co-authored by FairVote and the New America Foundation found that racial minority populations prefer ranked choice voting and find it easy to use, and that ranked choice voting increased turnout by 2.7 times in San Francisco.

**Minimizes strategic voting**. In elections without ranked choice voting, voters may feel that they need to vote for the "lesser of two evils," because their favorite candidate is less likely to win. With ranked choice voting, voters can honestly rank candidates in order of choice without having to worry about how others will vote and who is more or less likely to win.

**Mitigates impact of money in politics**. Candidates who have won in ranked choice voting elections have been successful because they built grassroots outreach networks – not because of mudslinging. Those more positive and inclusive campaign tactics cost less than polarizing negative radio and television elections, helping to explain why candidates seem able to win ranked choice voting elections even when they are outspent.

But some critics believe that the system would not necessarily produce better democratic outcomes.  The conservative Heritage Institute argues that ranked choice voting:

**Can be complicated and confusing**.

**Can obscure issue-driven dialogues** between and among candidates by eliminating genuine binary choices between two top-tier candidates. "You never really know who will be running against whom in the final vote count with ranked choice. Your votes are thrown into a fictional fantasy in which no one knows which candidate is really a substitute for another candidate who may not survive the initial rounds. It is all a numbers gimmick. You, as a voter, are not given the opportunity to make the final decision between competing substitutes."

**Disenfranchises voters,** because ballots that do not include the two ultimate finalists are "cast aside to manufacture a faux majority for the winner. But it is only a majority of the voters remaining in the final round, not a majority of all of the voters who actually cast votes in the elections."

In a 2016 essay in the journal Democracy, freelance writer and editor Simon Waxman argued:

> [A ranked choice voting] system may give life to more strident candidates, hoping to siphon first-place ballots from extreme voters who will give second preference to whichever major party is closest to them. This could result in… fringier competitors [blotting] the airwaves with attacks. Or it might produce strategic coalitions sniping at each other, leaving us effectively back where we started….

None of this is to say that [ranked choice voting] is sure to be hazardous. Maybe it is even an experiment worth trying. But it is notable that, in the midst of a presidential campaign that has unmasked deep and dangerous fissures in American politics, concerned citizens are looking to procedural minutiae as their savior. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that voters are grasping for a solution as simple as the problem is daunting….

[F]ailures of representation don't stem primarily from flawed voting procedure… Instead, political scientist Martin Gilens has figured out why legislators aren't listening to you: It's because you're not rich. His [analysis](#) of decades of public opinion polling and subsequent Congressional action finds, "In most circumstances, affluent Americans exert substantial influence over the policies adopted by the federal government, and less well off Americans exert virtually none." The economy of influence surrounding campaign finance is considerably to blame for this.

[https://democracyjournal.org/arguments/ranked-choice-voting-is-not-the-solution/]

While ranked choice voting may not be the cure-all for what ails presidential primaries or American democracy, it still has the potential to change the nature of the conversation. With a crowded field and candidates jostling to distinguish themselves, advocates argue that the ability to rank preferred candidates would allow voters to better express their political views.

**For Discussion:**

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?

2. According to the reading, what is ranked choice voting? What are some of the arguments for and against it?

3. What do you think? Would ranked choice be a better system than the "first-past-the-post" system we currently use?

4. In the reading, writer Simon Waxman argues that "concerned citizens are looking to procedural minutiae as their savior." What does he mean by that? What might be examples of "procedural minutiae"? Is it fair to characterize ranked-choice voting in this way? Why or why not?

5. Waxman argues that the problem of politicians failing to represent the interests of their constituents stems not from voting procedure, but from the disproportionate influence of wealthy Americans on the electoral process. Do you agree with this? Why or why not? Would changing the voting system do anything to address this problem?

6. What other ways could we change the presidential primary process, so it is more democratic?