

## **Rethinking Joe Biden's 'Resurgence'**

Chapter prepared for:

*The 2020 Democratic Primary: Key Developments, Dynamics, and Lessons for 2024*

**Peter K. Enns**

[peterenns@cornell.edu](mailto:peterenns@cornell.edu)

Professor, Department of Government  
Executive Director, Roper Center for Public Opinion Research  
Cornell University

**Jonathon P. Schuldt**

[ips56@cornell.edu](mailto:ips56@cornell.edu)

Associate Professor, Department of Communication  
Cornell University

The 2020 Democratic primary saw more candidates than any other since 1972, when the current system of caucuses and primaries began.<sup>1</sup> Representative John Delaney from Maryland was the first to enter the race, announcing his candidacy on July 28, 2017, just 188 days after Donald Trump’s inauguration (Delaney 2017). Tech entrepreneur, Andrew Yang, followed shortly after on November 6, 2017—just under three years before the 2020 presidential election. Two years later, in November 2019, former New York City Mayor, Michael Bloomberg, and former Massachusetts Governor, Deval Patrick, were the last to enter the race. In total, 29 major candidates vied for the Democratic nomination.

As more and more Democrats joined the race, some analysts were quick to draw comparisons with the 2016 Republican primary, wondering if a crowded field would again disadvantage mainstream politicians and perhaps benefit anti-establishment candidates like Donald Trump (Azari 2018; Silver 2019). The Iowa Caucuses, held on February 3, 2020, seemed to validate these expectations. The caucuses themselves were mired by coding errors that delayed results for days, but when the dust settled, Pete Buttigieg, mayor of South Bend, Indiana, received one more delegate than Senator Bernie Sanders.<sup>2</sup> The near tie between Buttigieg and Sanders meant that the newcomer to the national political stage and the most left-leaning candidate in the race were out in front after Iowa. Joe Biden, the former Vice President and longtime Senator—and the most mainstream Democratic candidate—finished fourth, behind Senator Elizabeth Warren and ahead of Senator Amy Klobuchar.<sup>3</sup>

A week later in the New Hampshire primary, the same two finished on top, but this time Sanders edged out Buttigieg. Klobuchar and Warren received the third and fourth most votes, respectively. It seemed like the crowded field was indeed disadvantaging Biden and providing opportunity for the relatively unknown Buttigieg. Writing for *The New York Times*, Jonathan Martin and Alexander Burns described Biden’s fifth place finish as “a stinging blow to his candidacy” (Martin and Burns 2020). As Cohen, Karol, Noel, and Zaller (2008, 291) explain, “Candidates, pundits, and scholars all agree that the first contests in Iowa and New Hampshire shape the primaries that follow,” and those early contests had been particularly brutal for Biden.<sup>4</sup>

Eleven days later on February 22, Sanders won the Nevada Caucuses with 46.8 percent of the votes, leading many major media outlets to confer “frontrunner” status upon Sanders in their headlines.<sup>5</sup> Biden, Buttigieg, and Warren followed. Given the importance of the early primaries and caucuses, it looked like Sanders was on his way to winning the Democratic nomination. According to *FiveThirtyEight*, his chances of winning the nomination hovered near 50% for much of February—more than three times the chances of the next closest candidate. Biden’s chances had dropped to about 10 to 15 percent, at one point equaling those of former New York mayor Mike Bloomberg, the second-to-last candidate to enter the race (Rakich 2020). A *Morning Consult* poll of 2,631 Democratic primary voters also had Biden polling behind both Sanders and Bloomberg (Yokley 2020). Warren had a near-zero chance of winning the nomination according to *FiveThirtyEight* (Rakich 2020). Amber Phillips declared Warren one of the “losers” of the Nevada Caucuses and concluded, “At this point, it’s not clear where Warren’s path is” (Phillips 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> We consider 1972 as the onset of the modern primary era (Skelley 2016), though some changes in the process have occurred since then, particularly between 1972 and 1980 (Norrander 1996).

<sup>2</sup> This count refers to “state delegate equivalents” (SDE) which determine the number of pledged delegates each candidate receives based on caucus vote tallies. Despite receiving one less SDE, Sanders actually received more total votes than Buttigieg (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/02/04/us/elections/results-iowa-caucus.html>).

<sup>3</sup> *Des Moines Register*: <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/elections/results/primaries/democratic/iowa/>

<sup>4</sup> Consistent with Cohen et. al.’s observations, the winner of the Iowa Caucuses had become the Democratic nominee in seven of the past nine contested Democratic primaries (O’Kane 2020).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, *Business Insider* (<https://www.businessinsider.com/bernie-sanders-nevada-win-cements-his-frontrunner-status-2020-2>), *National Public Radio* (<https://www.npr.org/2020/02/22/808503311/sanders-projected-to-win-nevada-caucuses-solidifying-status-as-front-runner>), *The BBC* (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51601813>), and *Vox* (<https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/2/24/21150580/bernie-sanders-elizabeth-warren-poll-democratic-primary-2020>).

A week later, however, the tide appeared to shift on February 29 when Biden won South Carolina. Although Sanders finished second, headlines announced, “Strong South Carolina victory breathes new life into Biden’s campaign” (Karson, Cunningham, and Scanlan 2020) and “Joe Biden gets his ‘comeback kid’ moment” (Yang 2020). Nevertheless, Biden was still viewed as trailing. A *Morning Consult* poll of 13,428 Democratic primary voters had Biden 13 percentage points behind Sanders and the poll predicted that neither would gain an edge from Buttigieg’s decision to drop out of the race. Yet, Biden’s success continued on Super Tuesday (March 3) when he won 10 of 14 states. While Sanders was still viewed as the frontrunner, talk of a Biden “resurgence” dominated news media. *The Wall Street Journal* announced “The Biden Resurgence: A very Super Tuesday makes the former Vice President the best Democratic hope to beat Bernie Sanders.” Other prominent headlines included “Joe Biden’s Super Tuesday Revival,” “Scenes from Joe Biden’s Super Comeback,” and “Joe Biden’s Super Tuesday Surge Reshapes the Democratic Race.”<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Wallace-Wells (2020) described the outcome as follows, “During the past seventy-two hours, a period in which Joe Biden’s political fortunes were rapidly improving, the former Vice-President often looked humbled, a little bewildered, as if he could scarcely believe what was happening to him.”

At first glance, the combination of Buttigieg and Sanders’ early success and Biden’s eventual nomination may seem to validate the narrative of a Biden resurgence. But we argue that Biden’s eventual victory should not have been a surprise. The strength of Biden’s support was evident well in advance of the early primary contests. In late August and early September 2018—almost a year-and-a-half before the Iowa Caucuses—we asked a national sample of likely voters about who they would most like to see run for president in 2020. Their responses not only foreshadowed Biden’s eventual Democratic nomination, but they anticipated Sanders’ and Warren’s second and third place finishes. The data also provide insight into Biden’s selection of Senator Kamala Harris as his vice-presidential running mate and Trump’s influence on the Republican party.

Below, we describe our survey and findings in detail, and why the 2020 primaries ended up exactly as we would have expected. We also highlight the implications of these findings for 2024.

### **The 2020 primary results were already evident in 2018**

More than two months before the 2018 Midterm Election, we conducted a national survey of more than 1,000 likely voters (Enns and Schuldt 2018).<sup>7</sup> Most of our questions related to the upcoming Midterm Election and political and social issues at the time. But we were also interested in the candidates that likely voters wanted to see in the 2020 presidential race. So we asked, “Now thinking ahead to the 2020 presidential election, which one person would you most like to see run for president on the Democratic ticket?” The next question asked, “How about the Republican presidential ticket?”<sup>8</sup> Often surveys provide a list of potential names and ask respondents to choose from among them. Our respondents, however, could name *anyone*. This provided an unfiltered indication of their most-preferred candidate more than two years before the presidential election.<sup>9</sup>

Understandably, some respondents did not have an answer about their preferred presidential candidate in an election that was still more than two years away. Nevertheless, only 16 percent of our Democratic respondents wrote they didn’t know or didn’t care who they would most like to see run for president on the Democratic ticket.<sup>10</sup> A handful of respondents offered the names of celebrities—both real and fake. On the Democratic side, Tom Hanks and Will Smith each got two mentions. Mickey Mouse got four! On the Republican side, Kid Rock and Kanye West each got a mention, as did Daffy Duck and Elmer Fudd. But overall, the responses

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<sup>6</sup> Headlines from *The New Yorker* (Wallace-Wells 2020), *Politico*, and *Time* (Ball 2020).

<sup>7</sup> We thank the Cornell Center for the Study of Inequality for generously supporting this research.

<sup>8</sup> We randomized this question order, so half of the respondents were randomly selected to be asked about the Democratic ticket first and half were randomly selected to be asked about the Republican ticket first.

<sup>9</sup> This section includes an expanded discussion of what we reported in *The Washington Post* in March 2020 (Enns and Schuldt 2020).

<sup>10</sup> An additional seven percent skipped the question.

showed an informed electorate, and the resulting patterns yield substantial insights into the 2020 primary. In describing the results, we first discuss what Republican responses suggest about Trump’s role in the Republican Party. We then discuss what our results teach us about the Democratic primary overall, and why the notion of a Biden “resurgence” may be more fiction than fact.

*Among Republicans*, Trump was the overwhelming favorite—56.5% of Republicans responded that Trump was the one person they would most like to see run for president on the Republican ticket.<sup>11</sup> No other name came close to the mentions that Trump received, illustrating that among Republicans, no one else appeared to have a serious shot at the nomination. Indeed, although a handful of individuals formally entered the Republican primary, Trump’s re-nomination was never in question. Former Representative Joe Walsh dropped out in February 2020 and former Massachusetts Governor Bill Weld dropped out in March 2020, having earned just one delegate vote. The lack of contestation—both in our survey and in the Republican primary—may also explain the Republican Party’s unorthodox display of unconditional support for Trump during the nomination process. Historically, each party adopts a party platform that identifies the official policy positions of the party. Instead of adopting a party platform, the official party position simply resolved, “That the Republican Party has and will continue to enthusiastically support the President’s America-first agenda.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, Trump’s agenda had become the party’s official platform.

Yet, despite the absence of consensus around alternative candidates in our survey and the unprecedented alignment of the Republican Party and Donald Trump, it is equally important that only a slight majority of Republicans indicated Trump—the incumbent president from their own party—as their most-preferred candidate. Support within Trump’s base was extremely strong, but the fact that less than sixty percent of Republicans named Trump is consistent with prior research showing that Trump’s core base is just a portion of the Republican party and smaller than is often assumed (Enns, Schuldt, and Scott 2018).

*Democrats’ responses* in our survey were equally as informative. Among Democrats, Joe Biden was the clear favorite (21.7%). Bernie Sanders, the next most-named candidate, earned less than half of Biden’s mentions (10.6%). From this perspective, Biden should have been viewed as the favorite from the outset. If so, his poor early performances in Iowa, New Hampshire, and Nevada may have had more to do with the peculiarities of these states. Iowa and New Hampshire, for example, are among the least racially diverse states in the country—45<sup>th</sup> and 47<sup>th</sup>, respectively (McCann 2020). Buttigieg may have benefited from his home state of Indiana’s proximity to Iowa and Sanders may have benefited from his home state of Vermont’s proximity to New Hampshire. The caucus systems of Iowa and Nevada may have also produced unique effects.

Similarly, Biden’s “surge” in South Carolina and on Super Tuesday may have simply reflected the representativeness of these states. Recall that our results were based on a national sample of likely voters. Thus, we would expect that as states more closely represent the national population, they would most closely align with our results. To evaluate this hypothesis, we conducted an additional analysis dividing our respondents by state. When we analyze who respondents in Iowa, New Hampshire, and Nevada most wanted to see on the Democratic ticket, Sanders was named more often than Biden. However, when we analyze respondents from South Carolina plus the 14 Super Tuesday states, Biden was named more often.<sup>13</sup> In other words, our survey results align with the actual outcomes in those contests. It is important to note that particularly for Iowa, New Hampshire, and Nevada, these analyses are based on relatively small sample sizes. But the patterns do not support the Biden resurgence narrative. More than a year before the Iowa Caucuses, Biden’s support was much

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<sup>11</sup> We report weighted percentages for all analyses.

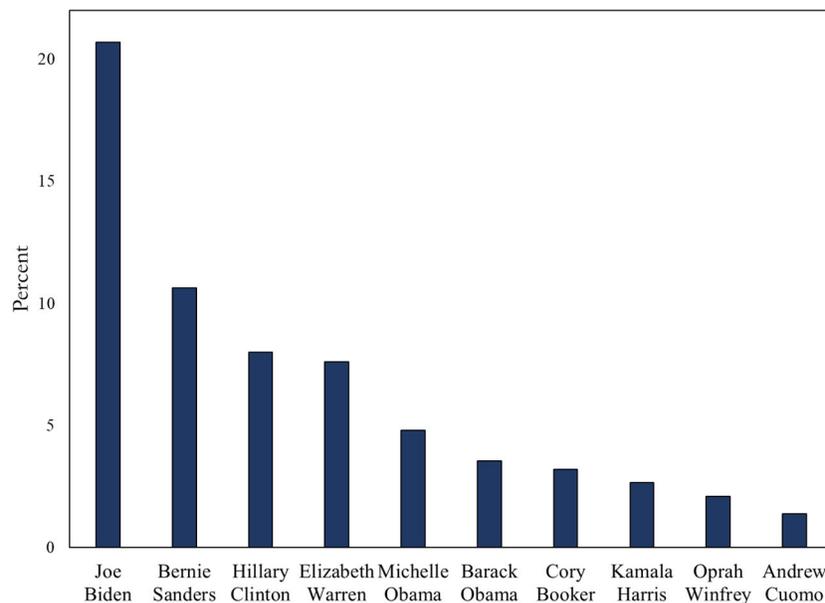
<sup>12</sup> The full resolution can be read here: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/resolution-regarding-the-republican-party-platform>.

<sup>13</sup> These results reflect weighted percentages based on all respondents. We analyze all respondents because the state-level responses necessarily include on fewer individuals. However, the same patterns are even more pronounced, with Sanders being named most often among those in Iowa, New Hampshire and Nevada and Biden being named most often in South Carolina and the Super Tuesday states, when we restrict the analysis to just Democratic respondents.

higher in South Carolina and the Super Tuesday States than in the states with the first three contests. Biden’s apparent “resurgence” may be more accurately seen as reflecting the order of the state caucuses and primaries combined with his pre-existing *nation-wide* high levels of support.

Although Biden’s support appears to have been evident already in 2018, we need to consider another potential confounding factor. A salient event occurred during our survey that might have influenced the support for Biden that we observed. On August 25, 2018, Senator John McCain passed away and Joe Biden gave an emotional eulogy at McCain’s funeral on August 30.<sup>14</sup> August 30 was the fourth day of our survey interviews. Since Biden gave the eulogy during our field period, we wanted to assess whether the high proportion of Democrats indicating Biden as their preferred candidate reflected news coverage of Biden’s eulogy for McCain, as opposed to a true preference for Biden as a presidential candidate. To evaluate this possibility, we analyzed responses to our survey from August 27 and 29, before McCain’s funeral, and from August 30 through September 6, the day of McCain’s funeral until the last day of our survey interviews. If Biden’s eulogy was driving the above results, we would expect an increase in the proportion of Democrats naming Biden during the second time period beginning on August 30. This was not the case. Prior to McCain’s funeral and Biden’s eulogy, 22 percent of Democrats named Biden as the person they most wanted on the 2020 Democratic ticket. From August 30 onward, a similar portion, 19 percent, named Biden. His tribute to John McCain was important and moving, but Biden’s early support does not appear to be driven by his widely covered eulogy.

In addition to foreshadowing Biden’s eventual nomination, our survey also provides important information about other aspects of the Democratic primary. Figure 1 shows the relative order of the top 10 Democratic names.<sup>15</sup> As noted above, Bernie Sanders was the second most mentioned Democrat after Biden—and indeed, Sanders finished second in the delegate count at the end of the primaries. Hillary Clinton came next (8%) followed closely by Elizabeth Warren (7.6%). Excluding Clinton, who did not enter the primary race, the top three delegate winners (Biden, Sanders, and Warren) were the most favored names 18 months before Biden’s nomination—in *that order* (in 2020).



**Figure 1:** Percent of Democrats (likely voters) naming each individual as who they would “most like to see run for president on the Democratic ticket”, Aug. 27-Sep.6, 2018

<sup>14</sup> The full eulogy can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfYggdO8q4>.

<sup>15</sup> The 23 percent of respondents who indicated don’t know or who skipped the question are not shown on the figure.

The presence of names like Hillary Clinton, Michelle Obama, and Barack Obama among the top 10 suggests that some of our respondents were simply naming the most prominent Democrats that came to mind. But that is precisely the point: by using an open-ended question that allowed respondents to name anyone they wanted, we were able to measure the names that came to likely voters' minds—and these names mapped tightly onto the actual primary results. After 29 candidates, 10 debates,<sup>16</sup> over 1,000 campaign events (Cadelago 2019), and more than \$1 billion in ad spending (Fischer 2020), the top three finishers match the top three names provided by likely voters more than 18 months before Sanders dropped out of the race, ensuring Biden's nomination. But this does not mean the primaries had no effect. First, notice that Senator Cory Booker and Senator Kamala Harris were the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> most-mentioned names (and the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> most popular out of those who entered the primary race). Yet, Booker and Harris were also among the first to drop out of the primary. The mismatch between their early popularity and early exits from the race is consistent with claims that Democratic National Committee fundraising rules and the lack of racial diversity in early primary states disproportionately hurt minority candidates (Flynn 2019; Pitner 2020). In addition, in light of Biden's pledge to choose a woman as his Vice-Presidential-running mate (Schwartz 2020), Harris' early popularity validates Biden's choice of Harris for that role. Of course, Harris brings an outstanding skill set and resume to the position of Vice President. But among the many potential contenders with excellent skills and experience, Harris' inclusion in the top 10 most-mentioned candidates in our dataset suggests she also brought name recognition and an electoral benefit that other running mates may not have provided.

Our data also highlight the role that money played in the Democratic Primary. Not a single Democrat in our survey mentioned Michael Bloomberg's name. When we analyze all likely voters, just 3 respondents (0.3% of the sample) mentioned Bloomberg, whose campaign spent more than \$1 billion during the primary. Despite almost no support before the 2018 Midterm Election, Bloomberg ended up with the 4<sup>th</sup> highest delegate count (Jin 2020), suggesting that this lavish spending was able to buy fourth place (Rogers 2020). If either Booker or Harris were able to spend over \$1 billion like Bloomberg, it's not hard to imagine a more successful outcome for either of them.

Although Oprah Winfrey was the ninth most popular name provided, her positioning between Kamala Harris and Andrew Cuomo suggests that claims such as "If she runs, Oprah could dominate the Democratic field in 2020" (Gaudiano 2020) were over confident. Based on these results, it is hard to imagine a scenario where Winfrey surpasses Harris, Booker, Warren, Sanders, and Biden. Perhaps this helps explain why she did not enter the race. If she had run, and spent a billion dollars of her fortune, she would have likely done better than Bloomberg, but these numbers do not suggest a path to the Democratic nomination.

Finally, it is notable that neither Andrew Yang nor Pete Buttigieg were named by any of our respondents. On one hand, this is not surprising. Neither was a national figure when we conducted our survey. But the fact that they were able to launch national campaigns highlights that latecomers can still influence the primaries. While our survey was highly predictive, it does not tell the entire story.

### **How Much Does the Party Decide?**

In their prominent book, *The Party Decides*, Cohen, Karol, Noel, and Zaller (2008) describe a primary system in which prominent party members (officeholders, interest groups, activists, and donors) engage in a long-running national conversation during the "invisible" primary to identify who can best unite the party coalition and win the general election. These party leaders then exert substantial influence on the final outcome via their endorsements. Donald Trump's nomination in 2016, which faced strong opposition from many prominent Republican leaders, seemed to call the influence of political parties on candidate selection into question

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<sup>16</sup> [https://ballotpedia.org/Democratic\\_presidential\\_primary\\_debates,\\_2020](https://ballotpedia.org/Democratic_presidential_primary_debates,_2020)

(Kurtzleben 2016).<sup>17</sup> But some have argued that Biden’s success after South Carolina resulted because the Democratic Party decided to support him. For example, in writing about the aftermath of Biden’s South Carolina victory, Grier (2020) argues that “one foundational aspect of Mr. Biden’s sudden strength was almost certainly that much of the institutional Democratic Party stood up and rallied around him... party actors from elected officials to local activists decided within a few days to coalesce around an imperfect but broadly acceptable alternative to Sen. Bernie Sanders, whom many feared would drag them to defeat in down-ballot races this fall.”

Were Pete Buttigieg and Senator Amy Klobuchar’s decisions to drop out of the race and endorse Biden prior to Super Tuesday evidence of the Party deciding? Or were Buttigieg’s status as a newcomer to the national political stage (who was not mentioned by anyone in our survey) and the fact that Klobuchar was only the 13<sup>th</sup> most popular Democrat in our data indicators that they lacked a realistic path to the nomination? If Biden’s path was clear, their decisions to drop out prior to Super Tuesday may not have changed the outcome. Instead, the timing of their decisions may have reflected other considerations. For instance, by dropping out at that point, they avoided potential defeat and had the opportunity to endorse the eventual winner in advance of Super Tuesday—or possibly earn goodwill from the winner, as Biden’s nomination of Buttigieg for transportation secretary may attest. Given Biden’s popularity in our survey, it may have been inevitable that they would end up endorsing him. Although we cannot know for sure, our survey results align with the latter.

Ideally, we would be able to look at open-ended responses to a question like ours in prior elections to see if the patterns we observed in 2020 replicate in other primaries. This would help us determine if candidates preferred early on typically predict the winner. Unfortunately, this is not possible, as we have been unable to find another open-ended question like ours. Instead, surveys typically offer respondents a set of candidates to select from, which can be particularly problematic for assessing early preferences. For example, in September 2014, a McClatchy-Marist Poll that asked respondents who they would vote for in the 2016 primary included Paul Ryan who did not end up running. Further, the survey did *not* include Ben Carson, John Kasich, Mike Huckabee, or Carly Fiorina—all of whom not only ran but ended up with at least one delegate vote.<sup>18</sup> With these types of closed-ended questions we cannot get an unfiltered look at support.

A more useful comparison comes from a Pew Research Center survey conducted in November of 2014. This national survey of more than 1,000 respondents asked the open-ended question, “Which political leader in the United States today do you admire most?” Although Pew’s question wording differs significantly from our open-ended question, most notably by focusing on “political leader” as compared to “candidate for president” and by not asking about Democratic and Republican leaders separately, a few patterns nevertheless stand out. First, as we see in Figure 2, Ted Cruz—who finished second in the delegate count in the 2016 GOP primary—was the candidate mentioned most often (Mitt Romney and George W. Bush, who received more mentions, did not run in 2016). Paul Ryan, whose name was included on the McClatchy-Marist poll but who did not run, was not mentioned in the Pew survey. In contrast Ben Carson, who was *not* included on the McClatchy-Marist poll, was the seventh most mentioned among Republican respondents in the Pew survey.<sup>19</sup> Also notable is the relative lack of separation among the most-mentioned candidates, which contrasts sharply with our survey in which Biden earned nearly double the mentions of Sanders. The lack of separation across Republican names in 2014 appears to foreshadow the confusion within the Republican field in the lead up to the 2016 presidential election. Finally, the mentions of Barack Obama and even Hillary Clinton among Republicans is quite

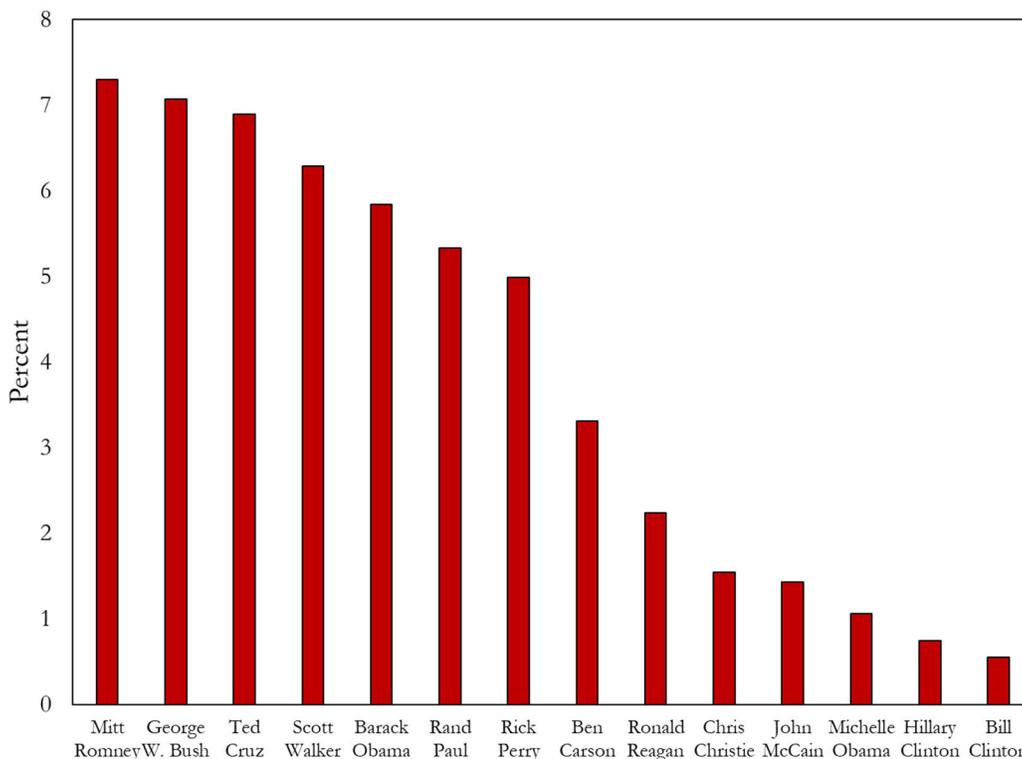
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<sup>17</sup> Although most of his Republican critics eventually changed their tune, becoming strong Trump supporters and, in many cases, joining his administration, during the primary Republican leaders were some of Trump’s biggest critics (Karni 2019).

<sup>18</sup> The specific question asked registered Republicans and Republican-leaning Independents, “If the 2016 Republican presidential primary or caucus in your state were held today, whom would you support if the candidates are Jeb Bush, Rand Paul, Paul Ryan, Chris Christie, Rick Perry, Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, Bobby Jindal, Rick Santorum and Scott Walker?” (McClatchy Poll 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Weighted percentages reported. Those indicating “none” not shown. The Pew Research Center combined names with fewer than 5 mentions were combined into the category “Other miscellaneous” (not shown).

stunning.<sup>20</sup> Prior to the vitriol that Trump introduced into the 2016 campaign, perhaps most embodied by “lock her up” chants at Trump’s rallies, Republicans were willing to express admiration for Clinton and Obama.



**Figure 2:** Percent of Republicans naming each individual when asked, “Which political leader in the United States today do you admire most?”, November 20-23, 2014 (Pew Research Center)

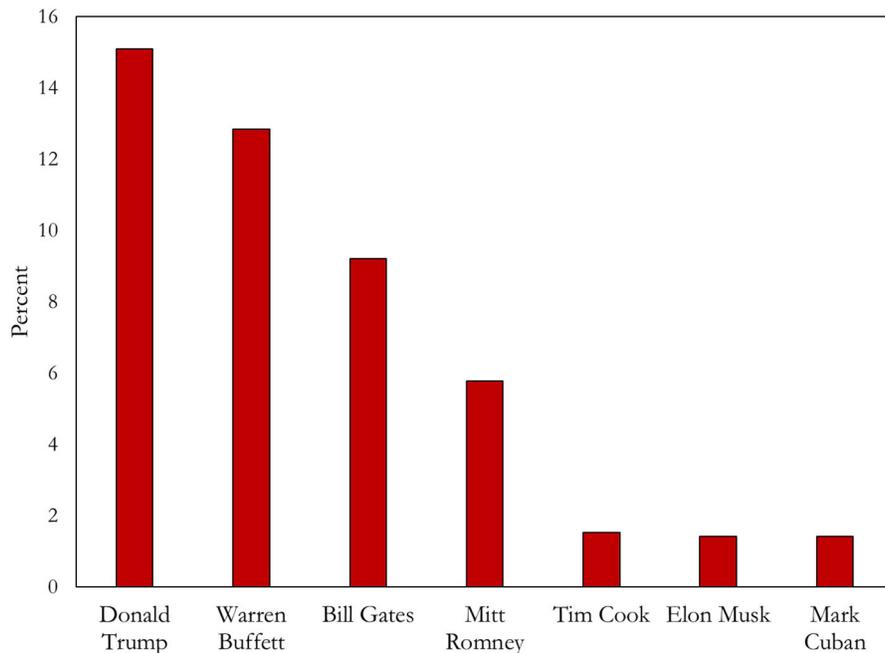
One notable absence in Figure 2 is Donald Trump: he did not make the list of most-admired politicians back in November of 2014. But the very next question in the Pew survey asked, “Which *business* leader in the United States today do you admire the most?” Figure 3 presents the results of this question for Republicans. Here, *Donald Trump tops the list*. Although he was not yet connected with politics, Trump was already a household name and regarded highly by Republicans. It is notable that Democrats did not hold Trump’s business leadership in the same regard. He was the 4<sup>th</sup> most-named individual among Democrats—behind Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, and Barack Obama—receiving just under four percent of Democratic responses.

Differences in question wording make direct comparison impossible. But again, two years before the election, and before any Republicans had announced their candidacy,<sup>21</sup> among Republican respondents Trump was a more-admired business leader than industry legends including Warren Buffett and Bill Gates. Being top-of-mind among Republicans as a business leader may have fed into Trump’s campaign strategy of positioning of himself as a hugely successful businessman and political outsider during the 2016 campaign, as exemplified by his “drain the swamp” rhetoric.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> When we also include those who lean toward the Republican Party in the analysis, admiration for Hillary Clinton is even more pronounced; 2.7% named Clinton, putting her *ahead* of Chris Christie and John McCain.

<sup>21</sup> Ted Cruz was the first to announce his candidacy on March 23, 2015 (Corasaniti and Healy 2015)

<sup>22</sup> Of course, Trump’s actual business record does not match this positioning. *Business Insider* described his business career as, “a series of flashy and ambitious investments that go bust, sometimes ending in bankruptcy, with Trump moving on from the wreckage each time” (Lichtenberg 2020). He also did not fulfill his promise to “drain the swamp”; the executive director of the Revolving Door Project gave Trump an “F” on this dimension (Reklaitis 2020).



**Figure 3:** Percent of Republicans naming each individual when asked, “Which business leader in the United States today do you admire most?”, November 20-23, 2014 (Pew Research Center)

### Lessons for the Future

Political scientists have long argued that U.S. presidential elections are largely predictable based on a few “fundamental” considerations, such as economic conditions and presidential approval (Enns and Lagodny 2021; Enns and Richman 2013; Gelman and King 1993; Erikson and Wlezien 2012).<sup>23</sup> The 2020 election was no different (Enns and Lagodny 2020). The data in this chapter suggest that it is also possible to forecast the outcome of primaries with a high degree of accuracy. This finding offers an important update to conventional wisdom, which holds that the early primary contests, particularly in Iowa and New Hampshire, send important signals about electability, which then influence subsequent primary voters’ decisions (Abramowitz 1989). Electability also relates to Norrander’s (1996) discussion of momentum. She writes, “Momentum characterizes a candidacy on the rise, with increasing media attention, voter support, and campaign contributions... Momentum can stall, reverse, recover, or end completely” (895). In contrast to the view that the early state contests signal electability and momentum, our results suggest that the final outcome begins to solidify much sooner than previously thought. Further, what looks like momentum may actually reflect the votes aligning with what we would have expected if we had surveyed likely voters in advance.

The main question is whether 2020 reflects a departure from the norm, or did our analysis uncover a longstanding process that has not been observed before because no one has asked likely voters who they would most like to see run? We believe the body of evidence we have uncovered supports the latter, but further research is necessary to know for sure.

*Our findings also offer several lessons for 2024.* First, while the order of primaries and caucuses had no observable effect on Biden’s ultimate nomination, the order appears to have influenced when Booker and Harris dropped

<sup>23</sup> 2016 may feel like an exception, but it is important to remember that Clinton won the popular vote as forecasted (Erikson and Wlezien 2016; Lewis-Beck and Tien 2016) and Trump’s position in the polls was evident well in advance of Election Day (Enns, Lagodny, and Schuldt 2017).

out. Starting with Iowa and New Hampshire disadvantages minority candidates, even when they have high name recognition.<sup>24</sup> The political parties need to recognize that the current primary process benefits white candidates because the early states are not representative of the country's overall demographic composition. Second, money also matters, as Mike Bloomberg's fourth place finish in the final delegate count attests. If the funding system changed, the primary and the outcome would look different. At the same time, our results indicate that money is not everything. Massive spending (over \$1 billion in Bloomberg's case) does not necessarily offset the benefit of being top-of-mind as a preferred candidate among voters early in the process.

On the Republican side, our results suggest that as GOP leaders announce their intention to run for the presidency in the lead up to 2024, those with early, broad-scale name recognition among Republican voters will have the best odds of winning the nomination. In this sense, Donald Trump may be a unique figure, as a former president who is widely admired—in a 2020 Gallup poll, he was the “most admired man” (living anywhere in the world), named by 18% overall, and by 48% of Republicans.<sup>25</sup> Admiration of the Trump family name is further indicated by Melania Trump's third place finish overall as the “most admired woman” (behind Michelle Obama and Kamala Harris) and *the most* admired woman among Republicans (Ivanka Trump was also mentioned, but she did not crack the top 10).

Of course, these high admiration ratings may say more about the time period in which the survey was conducted, which was late 2020. It is unclear whether this support will persist if Trump's legacy becomes attached to the more than 345,000 Americans who died from the Coronavirus during his presidency and if he and his family are mired in controversy and litigation when he leaves office (Paul and Ramey 2020).<sup>26</sup> But throughout his presidency, Donald Trump and his family have been able to maintain the admiration of many Republicans despite a cascade of controversies (e.g., Self 2020; Willis 2019). Thus, looking ahead to 2024, Donald's, Melania's, and even Ivanka's appearances on the “most admired” list suggest that other Republicans face an uphill battle if a Trump is on the ballot. We recommend that survey researchers ask the public to name the one person they would most like to see on the Republican ticket to see if this continues to be the case.

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<sup>24</sup> In 2008, Barack Obama won Iowa, but he may have benefited from his geographic proximity, being from Illinois. Also, John Edwards had one of his best performances in Iowa, leading to almost a three-way tie, which is consistent with the view that Iowa disproportionately benefits white candidates (Obama got 16 delegates, Hillary Clinton received 15, and Edwards received 14).

<sup>25</sup> Although Trump's 18 percent was the highest, the survey had a margin of sampling of error of +/- 4 percentage points, so his support was not statistically different from Barack Obama's 15 percent (<https://news.gallup.com/file/poll/328199/201229MostAdmired.pdf>).

<sup>26</sup> The more than 345,000 U.S. deaths from the coronavirus was as of January 1, 2020 ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/national/coronavirus-us-cases-deaths/?itid=hp\\_pandemic-guide-box-1208](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/national/coronavirus-us-cases-deaths/?itid=hp_pandemic-guide-box-1208)).

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