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The party rules help Trump

by [Ruth Marcus](#)

Donald Trump claims the Republican presidential primary system is “[corrupt](#)” and “rigged” against him. If anything, the opposite is true: The party’s rules have largely operated in Trump’s favor. Witness the fact that, going into Tuesday’s [primaries](#), Trump had won just [38 percent](#) of the popular vote but 47 percent of the [delegates](#) awarded so far.

Still, Trump’s griping seems to have resonated even beyond his own supporters. The dispute highlights the friction between the parties’ institutional interests in self-preservation and voters’ convictions that they run the show. This inherent tension tends to be submerged in less contentious election years, when those competing imperatives can both be accommodated.

Trump has “discovered what a lot of Americans have discovered, which is that the nomination of a president is not a public process,” the Brookings Institution’s Elaine Kamarck told me. “It’s a party process that the parties in modern times have allowed the public to participate in.”

Until the 1970s, nominees were mostly chosen by party regulars (more loaded word, bosses). In the early 20th century, some states instituted primaries at the urging of progressive reformers. “Let The People Rule” was Theodore Roosevelt’s catchphrase in his comeback bid at the 1912 GOP convention, as Geoffrey Cowan relates in his [new book with that title](#).

But these contests remained barely relevant, except for upstart candidates seeking to demonstrate appeal. In the 1952 Democratic nomination contest, as Kamarck recounts in “[Primary Politics](#),” Estes Kefauver won 12 of 15 primaries and 3 million votes, compared with 78,000 for his chief rival, Adlai Stevenson, who hadn’t even run. Stevenson won on the third ballot.

Things changed — for both parties — after the rancorous 1968 campaign, when Democrats Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy won the vast majority of primary votes but Hubert Humphrey, who did not compete in the primary, secured a first-ballot nomination. A post-election Democratic commission ushered in a new era for both parties in which, Kamarck wrote, “mass persuasion replaced elite persuasion.”

Yet that system entails choosing rules, which in turn embody choices about how much power the party should cede to voters:

- Should a majority be required? Actually, a party looking for an acceptable general election candidate could rationally require a super-majority. Democrats once had a two-thirds rule — although that can produce chaos, as when the 1924 convention required 103 ballots over 16 days.
- Should the primary be open, giving voice to independent voters whose views will matter in November, or should it be closed, better reflecting the preference of committed partisans?
- Should delegates be chosen, as [Democrats](#) mandate, by proportional representation, which empowers longer-shot candidates and risks a more drawn-out contest, or by some form of winner-take-all allocation, as Republicans allow states to choose in later contests?
- Is there a role for superdelegates, party leaders and elected officials to mediate the popular choice? [Democrats created superdelegates](#) in the aftermath of the 1972 George McGovern debacle and 1976 election of outsider Jimmy Carter.
- Should delegates be required to vote for the candidate whom voters in their state backed, and, if so, through how many ballots? Republican Party rules bind most delegates on the first ballot. Democrats' rules — following Ted Kennedy's unsuccessful bid to free delegates committed to incumbent Jimmy Carter in 1980 — are slightly looser, [requiring delegates to](#) “in good conscience reflect the sentiments of those who elected them.”

Ironically, the Republican Party's approach — winner-take-all states; no superdelegates; binding first-ballot votes — works in Trump's favor, notwithstanding his bellyaching.

Will the legacy of 2016 be to further empower voters — or the GOP reasserting control to prevent future Trumps? Political scientist Marty Cohen, a co-author of “[The Party Decides](#),” said Republicans would do better to nominate Trump — and use the ensuing disaster to tighten control.

“They can say this is what happens when the voters are left to their own devices . . . and make sure it doesn't happen again,” Cohen said.

Maybe, although the party might be wary of further inflaming grass-roots voters, and the history of rules changes suggests the likelihood of unintended consequences — as with the GOP's move this year to shorten the period during which it required that delegates be awarded proportionately. The intent was to produce a nominee faster, but the tweak ended up fueling Trump.

In the meantime, don't be fooled. Trump's real gripe isn't with the rules. It's with himself, and how badly prepared he was to exploit them.