

History of the National Nominating Convention

Since the Founding Fathers never planned for political parties when they were writing the nation's governing documents, the process of nominating candidates for president and vice president from respective parties grew organically and (at least at first) without a clear set of rules to govern them.¹ Over time however, these conventions became more planned, regulated, and predictable.

For the first two national elections following the ratification of the Constitution, conventions were unnecessary because there was no real competition for the presidency. George Washington was unanimously chosen by the electors from every single state: a feat never repeated in history. As vice president, John Adams was his natural successor and coasted to an easy victory in the election of 1796. Thomas Jefferson was elected vice president, having achieved the second most electoral votes (a rule that was later changed).²

In 1800, the first two American political parties were just in the process of changing from amorphous collections of like-minded politicians to truly organized groups. The most organized instance of the Federalist and Republican parties in government existed in the House of Representatives and in the Senate, and so it fell to these groups to nominate their candidates for president and vice president.

The leaders of the congressional Federalists met in relative secret (for discussing these types of political contests was something of a taboo in the 19th century) and chose incumbent President John Adams and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney of South Carolina as their nominees for president and vice president, respectively. Meeting as a group shortly thereafter, the Republicans chose Vice President Jefferson and Aaron Burr from New

¹ MacNeil/Lehrer Productions. (1996). *Online newshour interview with historian Michael Beschloss: Origins of the convention process*. PBS. Retrieved from http://www.pbs.org/newshour/convention96/retro/beschloss_history.html.

² Brookhiser, R. (2004). George Washington. In J. Taranto & L. Leo (Eds.), *Presidential leadership: Rating the best and the worst in the White House*. (pp. 15-16). New York, NY: Free Press.

York. These meetings were organized by the party caucuses in Congress and were led by influential members from both parties—notably, Alexander Hamilton for the Federalists and James Madison for the Republicans.³

The presidential nomination process from then on became more organized but followed the same basic format, with the caucuses in Congress providing the organization and venue for nominating candidates. But in 1832, the Anti-Masonic party, desperate to have a candidate that reflected their worldview that the ultimate virtues lay with the people and not the Washington elite, opted to hold a more open convention process. The convention that the Anti-Masons held that year brought in delegates from across the country to nominate William Wirt for president. The Democrats quickly followed suit later that year, nominating Andrew Jackson at their convention. The Whigs (predecessors to the Republicans) nominated Henry Clay at a convention that year.

Conventions continued in this similar style for a number of years. National delegates would be selected and actual business would be conducted at these meetings, often held in major cities. Chicago, New York, St. Louis, and Cincinnati were favorite destinations of both parties. The delegates (and the party) would go into the convention not knowing whom their nominee would be. Often, it would take many rounds of voting before delegates could agree on nominees for president and vice president. The Democrats did not choose Franklin Pierce until 49 rounds of voting had been completed. Delegates, chosen by party bosses, would show up pledged to a particular candidate and would often be persuaded to switch allegiances, thus resulting in a consensus choice, most of the time.

At the conventions, the proverbial “smoke-filled room” was the place where, every four years, the party bosses would go and discuss the slate of possible candidates. Deals would be struck, promises would be made, and jobs would be guaranteed. And in the end, the convention would conclude its business and announce the candidate to the world. Often, this individual

³ Larson, E.J. (2007). *A magnificent catastrophe: The tumultuous election of 1800, America's first presidential campaign*. New York, NY: Free Press.

would be a national unknown, because there was no primary election season by which the American public would get to know its candidates for the highest office in the land.⁴

Beginning in the 1960s, presidential primary elections began to take root. State parties decided that primaries were the most democratic way to select their delegates. In the 1960 election, Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts won each of the seven primaries, including several in southern states (overcoming concerns about his youth, inexperience, regionalism, and Catholic religion) that he ran in leading up to the convention. This gave him an enormous amount of credibility and momentum heading into the convention in Los Angeles that summer, propelled by Lyndon Johnson, the establishment favorite. The Kennedy campaign combined this energy with a sense that the country was headed in a new direction for a new decade (one of JFK's campaign slogans was "Leadership for the '60s"). The outside factors working for Kennedy made it nearly impossible for the convention delegates to come to any other conclusion than to nominate him. Conventions began to gradually, and often inharmoniously, drift toward a more rigid, primary-based nominating process, taking influence away from the key players inside the convention hall and giving it to the people.⁵

That trend came to a head in 1968 when the Democrats met in Chicago for their convention. This moment in American history was a tense and nervous one, with the Vietnam War escalating and causing incredible unrest at home. War protests divided both politicians and the country. With the Democrats being both the party of these anti-war protests and of the president who was waging the war, the 1968 Chicago conclave was destined to be a messy affair. Riots in the streets resulted in the Chicago police having to take emergency action to control them, which was highly controversial. The dynamic on the streets was a more intense version of

⁴ MacNeil/Lehrer Productions. (1996). *Online newshour interview with historian Michael Beschloss: Origins of the convention process*. PBS. Retrieved from http://www.pbs.org/newshour/convention96/retro/beschloss_history.html.

⁵ White, T.H. (1988). *The making of the President 1960*. New York, NY: Atheneum Publishers.

the chaos taking place inside the convention center. Humphrey only emerged as the nominee after Democrats had a stressful time choosing between candidates, looking to please the many flanks of their party—southern, anti-war, and the old Kennedy coalition.⁶ Humphrey did not win a single primary, yet he was the nominee.

Chicago in 1968 would go down in history as a turning point for national party conventions. The Republican convention later that summer was a carefully orchestrated, intensely organized, and scripted event designed to minimize controversy. The tone and tenor of the GOP convention that year was reflective of the man the Republicans were nominating for president and the type of political party he wanted to have. Richard Nixon ran and won this campaign on a return to “law and order,” and that is exactly what the GOP convention represented.⁷

The Republican convention that year represented a pivot to less dramatic, more controlled conventions, and most subsequent conventions would follow that formula. But that did not mean that drama would be removed from the presidential nominating process; conventions would just become part of a larger story arc that also encompassed the primaries, debates, and the ever-growing media wars between the campaigns. Throughout the remainder of the 20th century, being a repeating delegate at a political convention was characterized by experiencing mostly boring and scripted events, with the occasional exciting and thrilling spectacle.

The first of these instances was the Republican convention in 1976. Governor Ronald Reagan made a run at the GOP nomination against the incumbent president, the unpopular Gerald Ford. Ford had not been elected by the American people to serve in either constitutional office: the embattled Richard Nixon, who later resigned after Watergate, had appointed him as vice president. A sense of distrust of the Washington establishment made incumbency a liability for Gerald Ford, and a

⁶ MacNeil/Lehrer Productions. (1996). *Going back to Chicago*. PBS. Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/convention96/retro/chicago.html>.

⁷ Schieffer, B. (2003). *This just in: what I couldn't tell you on TV*. New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

burgeoning conservative movement that aimed to take the Republican Party rightward saw Reagan as its leader and supported him in the primaries.

Reagan won 23 states and 45% of the delegates, coming up short from Ford's 27 states and 53% of the delegates. Neither candidate had the delegates to win the nomination, so a floor fight was necessary. Ford announced he would drop incumbent Vice President Nelson Rockefeller from the ticket, but he had yet to announce a replacement by the time the convention began. Seeing the opportunity to drive a wedge between the moderate and conservative wings of the party based on Ford's eventual VP pick, the Reagan team proposed a rules change that would require the potential nominees to announce their running mates before the roll call vote for president. When this vote failed, it was clear that Ford would have the ability to secure his nomination by the GOP, which he did, by just over 100 votes out of a total of over 2,000 cast.⁸

In 1980, the Democrats faced the real possibility of a brokered convention for the first time in decades. Edward Kennedy ran against the incumbent President Jimmy Carter for the Democratic nomination and won 12 primaries. Kennedy made it clear that he offered a new direction for the Democratic Party and for the country, while simultaneously attacking Carter's record. The senator from Massachusetts attacked the incumbent's performance when it came to the situation unfolding in Iran, in which 52 Americans were being held hostage at the Iranian embassy, and the dismal economy, which was ridden with "stagflation"—stagnant economic growth and inflation—a seemingly impossible problem to solve. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAn-SIPQpn8>)

However, Carter was able to build up enough of an early lead to ward off the possibility of a Kennedy nomination. Carter also ensured that delegates to the convention were "locked in" for him beforehand. Kennedy, though, refused to concede the nomination even well after the delegate math made

⁸ Clymer, A. (2012, March 21). The convention of '76. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/21/the-convention-of-76/>.

it impossible for him to win. The result was a dramatic Democratic convention in New York City. Kennedy tried to get certain delegates, bound by the rules to vote for President Carter, released from their commitments so they could vote for him. His last-ditch effort at the nomination failed, but he weakened the sitting president. Kennedy finally conceded the nomination on the second to last day of the convention, giving a rousing speech calling for a more liberal party platform (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5cKYckTWEM>). 1980 marked the last time in the modern era that there was genuine drama at the nominating conventions over whom would be the party nominee.⁹

Throughout the remainder of the 20th century, conventions for both parties remained relatively routine procedures in which nominees were already decided well in advance. Conventions became events designed to excite the party faithful and present the nominee to the national stage.

Various conventions since 1980 have included moments that still make the events relevant: Walter Mondale's declaration that both he and Ronald Reagan would raise taxes, but that only Mondale was being honest with the American people; George H.W. Bush's "Read My Lips: No New Taxes" pledge; Pennsylvania governor Bob Casey's inability to speak at the 1992 Democratic convention because of (according to him) his opposition to abortion; the 2004 GOP convention in New York, site of the fall of the World Trade Center three years prior; and Barack Obama's historic acceptance speech for the Democratic nomination at Invesco Field in 2008.

Conventions continue to be relevant to the national political scene even as they have become more scripted and rehearsed affairs. This is due to the fact that they are still political theater and are often timed to introduce the nominee to the country at the opportune moment. As the 2012 conventions approach, the historic significance of these events remains. Television networks may no longer feature "gavel to gavel" coverage, but voters

⁹ Video interview with Tad Devine, 7/27/12.

across the nation will learn about the major party nominees through the Internet, social media, and other sources.