

Nominations, Conventions, and Presidential Campaigns

Presidential nominating conventions are not mentioned in the U.S. Constitution, but they play a key role in American politics. Conventions mark the transition between two key periods of a presidential campaign: the nominating process and the general election. Both major parties nominate their presidential candidates much differently than they did in the 19th century. In fact, presidential candidates did not even attend conventions until 1932. The motivation for modern reform occurred in the second half of the 20th century, when the McGovern-Fraser commission, established by Democrats in the wake of the 1968 convention, created a way for voters to participate directly in the nominating process. Republicans followed with reforms of their own, but in a more incremental and cautious fashion (mostly because Republicans won most of the presidential contests in that period and saw no need to change their processes).

The convention is the body that nominates candidates for president and vice president. It also creates a party platform, outlining the party's positions on the major issues in the presidential campaign. Convention delegates serve as the "legislature" because they make major decisions on behalf of the party. In the years between conventions, party chairs make these major decisions for the party.

National party conventions serve many functions. First, they allow different groups within a political party to debate and resolve their conflicting positions on major issues (economy, social issues, foreign policy). They also serve as a major political rally, bringing thousands of party elites and rank-and-file members together in one location. Some observers claim that it resembles a carnival atmosphere while critics complain it is more like a disorganized zoo. However, conventions are still important because of the images they produce. Critics note that in the 21st century, with instant communication linking communities together across the world, parties could hold one-day

conventions in the nation's capitol, instead of the traditional four-day affairs. This would eliminate many of the costs associated with travel. However, it is unlikely that either party would do this alone.

In the pre-Civil War era (before 1860), parties gathered with, at most, a few hundred delegates and even fewer spectators. They held these "conventions" in small buildings or places of worship. Due to the slow pace of transportation and communication, leaders held conventions in centrally located spots. Baltimore was the most popular spot in this early era. As America expanded westward, Chicago ("the Midwest") replaced Baltimore as the most chosen location. Chicago has hosted 25 major party conventions since 1860.¹

Past Practices: Primaries and Conventions

Presidential primaries are a relatively recent phenomenon. They originated as part of the Progressive movement in the early 1900s. Progressives attacked corruption and sought to reform the political process. They spoke out against the connection between party bosses and big businesses and argued that government would be better if it were closer and more accountable to the voters. Primaries, run by state and local governments, would allow voters to choose their nominees.

After a brief flurry of presidential primaries between 1900 and 1912, presidential primary elections declined. Historians point to the effect of the Great Depression and World Wars: people focused on more immediate matters. Primaries were also costly events. Furthermore, party leaders often opposed primaries, and with low voter participation, many candidates for office ignored them.² In this era of "party bosses" and minimal primaries, local party leaders often controlled the majority of delegates or entire state delegations

¹ *National Party Conventions, 1831-2008*, CQ Press 2010, p. 27

² *Ibid.*

because delegates were selected in private party meetings or state conventions. Candidates for president needed the support of party leaders and bosses, not voters, in order to secure the nomination.

Until the 1960s, presidential candidates sought party nominations at the national party convention. Those in attendance, including party leaders, arrived at the convention without knowing who would receive the nomination. They only learned after a roll call vote of state delegations, a process that often occurred multiple times to select a candidate with a majority of the delegations' support.

Presidential primaries remained relatively rare occurrences until the 1960s. By 1968, primaries played a larger role in American politics. That turbulent year (and, for the Democrats, riotous convention) led both parties to find ways to increase popular participation in the nomination process. By 2000, Democrats held 44 primaries, after only holding 16 in 1960. Since 1968, neither party has nominated a candidate who did not compete in primaries. Since 1972, all major party nominees have received the most votes in the primaries (2008 is a slight exception because Hillary Clinton received more primary votes than Barack Obama, but he received more if you count caucus states).

In 1960, Senator John F. Kennedy challenged Senator Hubert Humphrey in two primaries: West Virginia and Wisconsin. Kennedy's surprising victories in both states led Humphrey to withdraw from the race. When some party leaders, no doubt concerned about Kennedy's ability to win nationwide because of his Catholic faith, tried to find an alternative to Kennedy, voters pushed back. This marked a point where primaries replaced elite party leader approval as the way to choose a candidate. Senator Barry Goldwater and former Vice President Richard Nixon used primary victories in 1964 and 1968, respectively, to demonstrate their ability to appeal to voters.

In 1968, parties lost their remaining grip on presidential nominations, especially the Democrats. During the spring, anti-Vietnam War candidates Eugene McCarthy and Robert F. Kennedy won over two-thirds of the primary votes. By March, Lyndon Baines Johnson, the sitting President, had chosen not to run for reelection. In June of 1968, Kennedy was assassinated immediately after his victory in the California primary. In the wake of Kennedy's assassination, party leaders chose Hubert Humphrey, Johnson's vice president. While voters knew Humphrey, he had not competed in a single primary.

In Chicago, protesters took to the streets in opposition to Humphrey's selection and the larger issues such as the Vietnam War. The ensuing battle on the streets, and excessive police force, spilled over onto the convention floor. Fistfights broke out on the floor, organizers excluded rebellious delegates, and the convention spiraled out of control. Some party members questioned the legitimacy of the nomination itself.

Democratic Party Reform in the Wake of 1968

Before 1968, presidential candidates competed in only a few spring primaries (New Hampshire in March, finishing in California in June). The primary "season" was short. In response to the events of 1968, including the fact that the party nominee did not compete in a single primary and lost the general election, Democrats changed their nominating rules. The change in rules represented an attempt to allow voters to choose their leaders. Party leaders focused their outreach efforts on liberals and minorities, groups that felt alienated from the political system. These new rules, first in place for the 1972 election, made the process more open and responsive to rank and file party voters, reducing the power of party elites to control their local and state delegations to the conventions.

In 1972, the first election with an increased role for presidential primaries, Democrats nominated George McGovern. In the general election, Nixon defeated McGovern in a landslide. McGovern won

only Massachusetts in the electoral college. By 1980, mass participation in primaries had become the norm for Democrats, with 37 primary contests. Ted Kennedy challenged President Carter in the 1980 presidential primary, in part because he felt Carter was not progressive enough on health care and the economy.³

Kennedy's attempt to unseat the incumbent president weakened Carter in the general election. In 1980, there were very few elected officials on the convention floor. The rules eliminated the automatic elected officials' status as delegates and forced them to compete with their own constituents in primaries, which made elected officials very uncomfortable.

Reform after 1980: The Hunt Commission and Superdelegates

In the wake of Carter's massive defeat, the Democratic Party created a new block of delegates officially known as "party leader and elected official delegates," more commonly known as "superdelegates." The stated goal for superdelegates was to include party leaders in Democratic conventions without forcing them to run against their constituents. Party leaders also wanted to ensure that uncommitted party elites could help choose a nominee if a clear one did not emerge from the primaries. This helped Walter Mondale in 1984, as the Democratic nomination battle dragged on between Mondale and Gary Hart. Superdelegates rallied behind Mondale, ensuring him the Democratic Party nomination. Approximately 80% of superdelegates supported Mondale.

Reform after 1988: "Super Tuesday" and Front-Loading

After Ronald Reagan's landslide victory over Walter Mondale in 1984, Democrats again sought to improve their electoral chances. They created a full-scale primary vote across the South on the second Tuesday in March that came to be known as "Super Tuesday." The Southern Legislative Conference (SLC) created the Super Tuesday

³ Tad Devine video interview, July 27, 2012.

event to increase the impact of southern voters in the nominating process. Twelve of the 16 states with a primary were from the south. Ironically, another candidate from the Northeast, Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis, secured the nomination.

Since the 1970s, states began moving their primaries forward on the calendar in an effort to increase their influence. In turn, it is more difficult for poorly funded and lesser-known candidates to secure the nomination. Democrats created a new commission to lessen the concentration of “early” primaries.

Post-2004 Reforms

Following George W. Bush’s defeat of John Kerry in 2004, Democrats created a commission called the “Commission on Presidential Nomination Timing and Scheduling.” It attempted to balance regions, economics, and racial composition of states and chose Nevada to conduct a caucus between Iowa and New Hampshire, and South Carolina to conduct a primary the following week after New Hampshire. Any other states that violated these guidelines could lose all or half of their delegates at the national convention. In 2008, when Florida and Michigan scheduled primaries in January, they lost half of their delegates at the convention. The new rules did not prevent states from “front-loading” to increase their influence. On Super Tuesday (February 5), 16 states held primaries. The drawn-out contest between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton did boost turnout to nearly 40 million votes cast in the overall primary.

Republicans won all presidential contests but one (1976, post-Watergate) between 1968 and 1988. Therefore, they saw no need to change the nominating process: it worked quite well for them. When Bill Clinton won back-to-back victories in 1992 and 1996, Republican leaders began to question the front-loaded primary calendar and the candidates it produced. In 2004, Republicans, like Democrats, chose to punish states that held primaries before February 5th. When five states moved their primaries ahead of that date, the Republican National Committee stripped them of half of their delegates.

However, they made exceptions for two of the states, South Carolina and New Hampshire, because of their traditionally early role.

Current Practices: Iowa and New Hampshire Go First

While both parties, especially Democrats, have altered their primary process and calendar often since the late 1960s, one trend remains constant: campaigns start in the Iowa caucuses, followed by the New Hampshire primaries.

Iowa caucuses became important in 1972, when Democrats held January caucuses in the state. The results of the precinct caucuses were not exact, and “uncommitted” came in first. The next highest number of votes went to front-runner Edmund Muskie and insurgent candidate George McGovern. McGovern’s “better than expected” showing in Iowa gave a boost to his candidacy, and his second place showing in New Hampshire further propelled his candidacy. In 1976, Jimmy Carter won the most votes of any Democratic candidate (“uncommitted” won again), and he framed this as a “victory” as he headed to New Hampshire. Carter won New Hampshire before capturing the Democratic Party nomination and, ultimately, the presidency. In 1980, Republicans began holding a straw poll before their caucuses, which made it function like a party primary. A straw poll is a cross between a convention and a state fair. Attendees purchase a ticket and the results are non-binding. However, they are important because they test a candidate’s organization and fundraising strength. As a result of his third place showing in the August 2011 straw poll, Tim Pawlenty dropped out of the 2012 GOP presidential race. In Republican caucuses, which occur the following year, Iowa voters cast their ballots by secret ballot, while Democrats gather publicly.

The New Hampshire primary has played a key role in American politics since 1952, when voters could express their candidate preference. Even though the vote was not linked to the selection of convention delegates, the results helped capture the strength of

candidates. In 1952, General Dwight D. Eisenhower and Senator Estes Kefauver attracted media attention due to their strong showing in the preference vote primary: voters preferred Eisenhower over Robert Taft and Kefauver over President Harry Truman.

New Hampshire has protected its “first primary in the nation” status by passing a law that gives its secretary of state the power to change the primary date to precede any other primary by one week. In 2012, the New Hampshire primary took place on January 10th. The Democratic and Republican Parties have cemented New Hampshire’s role by limiting state parties from holding any contests and punishing them for violating this rule.

A caucus is a local meeting of party members, usually at the precinct level. Fewer than 10% of Republicans or Democrats participate in many caucuses, so many observers question how representative they are.⁴ A precinct is a geographic district, created for election purposes, that contains at least one polling station. Precincts are the smallest unit in the electoral system and usually contain 200 to 1,000 voters. In caucuses, party members register their preference for a candidate in a public way by joining a group of supporters for that candidate in person. They tend to attract the most passionate and dedicated members of political parties. Unlike primaries, where voters cast a private ballot at their regular polling place on a specific election day, caucuses involve voters spending several hours “caucusing,” sometimes more than one day. Democrats provide for proportional representation in their caucuses, which means that any candidate that receives support from at least 15% of the caucus participants is eligible to win delegates. In Iowa, delegates are chosen at the local level, then the county, then by congressional district conventions, and then the state convention. Caucuses tend to attract local party activists, and first-timers may find it bewildering.

⁴ Michael Goldman Video Interview, August 1, 2012.

In both types of elections (caucuses and primaries), presidential candidates “win” delegates according to the results. When a presidential candidate drops out of the race, the status of their delegates depends on the party rules. Republican rules on whether delegates must vote for a certain candidate varies from state to state. In some states, delegates are bound to a candidate unless that candidate officially releases them. Democrats have a more flexible rule, where delegates “shall in all good conscience reflect the sentiments of those who elected them.”⁵ They created this rule in the wake of the 1980 primary contest between Jimmy Carter and Ted Kennedy, in which delegates were bound to the candidates they supported.

Critics of the caucus system point out that party insiders or special interest groups dominate caucuses, leading to unrepresentative results. In Iowa, Democrats also point out the lack of ethnic minorities in the state. However, its defenders argue that Iowa caucuses test candidates in a way no other state can, and that it can unite the party. They also emphasize the level of civic engagement in Iowa. Furthermore, caucuses are less expensive to administer than primaries. In Iowa, candidates must interact on a face-to-face, personalized basis, engaging in “retail politics.” Retail politics refers to the ability of voters and candidates to meet one another in person instead of through television ads or mass mailings.

As the importance of Iowa and New Hampshire has increased, candidates have turned to television advertisements to reach more voters. In the modern era, it is important for candidates to win either Iowa or New Hampshire, and if they do not win either, to at least place in the top three.

Every presidential nominee since 1976 has either won Iowa or New Hampshire or finished in the top three in both. With a few exceptions,

⁵ Tad Devine Video Interview, July 27, 2012.

the current process leads to fast decisions on candidates before voters can completely assess them. The process also favors well-known and well-financed candidates. Some critics complain that the front-loaded process creates a “rush to judgment.” Those who defend “front-loading” note that an early resolution to the nomination allows the presumptive nominee to start working on their general election campaign.

Reform-minded observers have offered various proposals such as a single national primary, a system of regional primaries, or holding a national convention capable of choosing a slate of candidates in the spring of an election year. Then, parties could hold primaries among leading candidates and allow voters to choose among them.

Whenever a political party suffers defeat in a presidential election, its power structure changes the rules to improve their chances for next time. The current system is less than 50 years old, and despite its drawbacks, supporters note that presidential candidates are chosen in a much more open, democratic way than before.

Choosing A Convention Site

National parties choose convention sites several years in advance. Many factors go into the selection, including practical ones. Cities must have adequate hotel and meeting hall facilities and be willing to put up considerable amounts of money. In 1972, both parties chose Miami Beach, because its island location made it easier to contain protesters. Democrats especially were looking for a calmer experience in the wake of 1968.

When conventions re-nominate a sitting president, party leaders tend to defer to the president’s wishes. In 2004, Republicans chose New York City, which suffered from the 2001 terrorist attacks, and it highlighted President Bush’s strength. In 2012, Democrats chose Charlotte, North Carolina due to their success there in 2008 (and

desire to keep North Carolina and its 15 electoral votes in the Democratic column).

Convention Schedules

Once parties choose a location, they establish three major convention committees: Credentials, Rules, and Platform (party positions on major issues). Then, the party appoints convention officers. These basic components of national party conventions have remained relatively stable since the 1800s.

In recent years, party leaders have streamlined convention schedules due to declining interest of major television networks and the public at large. In 2012, the conventions will only last three days. However, even as the number of television viewers decline, conventions still remain “made for television” events and a showcase for the party as it attempts to attract voters and introduce its nominees to the nation. Convention schedulers keep prime time television audiences in mind as they present the party’s (and candidate’s) strengths to the public. These typically include: 1) the keynote speech, delivered by a rising star within the party and/or someone representing a group the party is trying to attract; 2) the vice presidential nominee’s speech; 3) the nominating ballots, especially the one that officially clinches the nomination; 4) the presidential nominee’s acceptance speech. Members of both parties always try to avoid a situation like 1972, when Democratic presidential nominee George McGovern gave his acceptance speech after 2:30 a.m.

Despite the criticism, modern national nominating conventions allow parties to showcase their candidates, rising stars, leaders, and positions in front of a national audience. While they are no longer the event where nominees are chosen, they still mark an important transition point in presidential campaigns. Conventions ratify the results of the primaries and caucuses and introduce vice presidential nominees. Once both major party nominees have delivered their

acceptance speeches, the general election campaign officially begins.