

Presidential Nominating Conventions: Unconventional This Year?

David Wolfford

With the Republican and Democratic national conventions coming this July in Cleveland and Philadelphia, respectively, let's examine how these institutions play a key role in our national democracy and whether they will be worth watching. In recent decades, reforms of the nomination systems have aimed at producing highly scripted conventions that look good on television and avoid suspense or dramatic surprises. The result, as John C. Green and John S. Jackson put it, has been to make the conventions "the Rodney Dangerfield of U.S. political institutions: They don't get no respect."¹ In fact, the last multi-ballot, brokered convention took place in 1952. There have been some competitive contests since—in 1976, Ronald Reagan challenged incumbent Gerald Ford with 1,070 votes to the president's 1,187—but conventions have generally become more predictable and less news-worthy. With this year's competition for both the Republican and Democratic nominations, however, the chances have become much higher for a convention like those of yore.



AP Photo

Delegates hold up "Stop the War" signs, referring to the Vietnam War, on the floor of the 1968 Democratic National Convention to nominate a candidate for the U.S. presidential election. The convention was held in Chicago, Illinois, from August 26 to August 29, 1968.

Conventions were born in Baltimore before the 1832 presidential election. On September 26, 1831, the Anti-Masonic party, which had a general disdain toward the secret order of Masons and a particular distrust of President Andrew

Jackson, gathered at the Athenaeum, a large Baltimore church. One hundred and sixteen delegates from thirteen states nominated Maryland statesman William Wirt.² Two more parties, the short-lived National Republicans and

the Democrats, gathered later in the same building. Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky declined an invitation to attend the National Republican event that nominated him, claiming he could not "without incurring the imputation of presumptuousness or indelicacy," thus setting a century-long standard.³ Subsequent conventions established additional customs and procedures, like determining delegate allocation and the threshold for nomination. Though most parties have nominated their standard bearer on the first ballot, divisive gatherings have required the late introduction of compromise candidates, seen factions bolt to form new parties, and caused voters to avoid the eventual nominee (see the sidebar on "Four Turbulent Conventions," p. 85).

In 1948, television provided the new lens through which these contests would be judged. Republicans, Democrats, and Progressives chose Philadelphia as their site that year, the center of the nation's developing TV network. Broadcasts reached 18 cities from Boston to Richmond airing on 500,000 TV sets. The Big Three networks provided gavel-to-gavel coverage for the next several conventions.⁴

In 1952, Republican Robert Taft lost to Dwight Eisenhower in a close convention vote amid violent and dangerous floor fights, booing of speakers, and a fire set on the convention floor. "We can't let ourselves be seen on television like this," a GOP producer said after the fracas. In 1968, America watched a Democratic Party meltdown as support for the Vietnam War faded. Though he did not enter one of the 15 prima-

Party Conventions Timeline

1831	First National Convention, Anti-Masonic Party
1832	First Democrat Party Convention
1839	First Whig Party Convention
1840	First Official Party Platform, Democrats
1844	First “Dark-Horse” Candidate, Democrat James Polk, won after 9 ballots
1856	First Republican National Convention
1880	Most ballots required to nominate a Republican (James Garfield)—36
1884	First African American to serve as a convention official, Republican House Rep. John Roy Lynch of Mississippi, was named Temporary Chairman
1888	First African American to receive a vote in presidential balloting—Frederick Douglass at the Republican convention
1892	First post-Civil War minor party convention nominee to win electoral votes—Populist James Weaver
1904	Florida Democrats selected delegates in the first-ever presidential primary
1924	First convention broadcast on radio
1924	Most ballots required to nominate a Democrat (John W. Davis)—103
1932	First nominee to accept in person at the convention—Franklin Roosevelt
1940	First convention broadcast on television (limited to New York-area)—Republican
1948	First live “national broadcast” of conventions (mainly viewed in the eastern United States, where the TV network of the time was concentrated)
1952	Most recent brokered convention; Democrats nominated Adlai Stevenson
1964	First woman placed in nomination by a major party—Republican Margaret Chase Smith
1972	First time both major parties selected a majority of delegates via primary elections
1980	Democrats required delegates to be split evenly between women and men
1984	First woman named to national ticket as a vice-presidential candidate—Democrat Geraldine Ferraro
2000	First Jewish American named to a national ticket as a vice-presidential candidate—Democrat Joseph Lieberman
2008	First African American nominated by a major party—Barack Obama

ries that year, Vice President Hubert Humphrey won the nomination with a rather white, male, and still largely conservative crowd of delegates. The chaotic disputes on the floor with the backdrop of Chicago police clubbing anti-war protestors made for terrible optics, revealed a disjointed party, and helped propel Republican Richard Nixon to a victory that November.⁵

The 1968 debacle also revealed that the delegates in the convention hall did not necessarily think like, look like, or vote like the party’s rank-and-file members. Fully 70 percent of the Democratic primary voters favored the anti-war candidates, Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy, but only about 40 percent of all convention delegates were elected in primaries, and the convention voted to nominate the pro-war Humphrey. The Democrats followed with a generation of reforms. The party has outlawed the unit rule option (the winner-take-all method) and instead requires states to award delegates proportionately among successful candidates after primary elections, to fairly reflect voters’ choices at the convention. Delegates are split evenly between men and women, and the party follows affirmative action goals to include minority delegates. The Democrats dragged the Republicans into reforms that also made primaries more important and aimed, without establishing quotas, at equal representation of men and women and greater participation by minority groups. Both parties moved to hold more state primaries with an increasingly binding nature. In 1968, primaries determined, on average among the two parties, 39 percent of the convention delegates. In 1972, they determined 61 percent. By 2000, 44 states held primaries, which determined 74 percent of the national delegates.⁶

The reforms have increased citizen participation and assured greater levels of democracy, but they have also resulted in predictable, boring theater. Since the mid-1980s, the nominees have usually been decided by mid-March.

Four Turbulent Conventions

Though most presidential nominating conventions have been civil and decisive—only 15 of the Democrats' 47 and 10 of the Republicans' 40 conventions have required more than one ballot—some of these intense party gatherings have revealed division and discord. Before the recent era in which pre-planned events and pre-determined nominees have dominated, conventions were often turbulent. In some cases, competing delegations arrived from the same states, resulting in disruptive and sometimes violent credentials fights. The following four turbulent twentieth-century conventions would be interesting for students to research.

1912 Republicans

The 1912 Republican nomination campaign pitted an incumbent president against a former one, only to split and redefine the party, and to ultimately lose the election. Former President Teddy Roosevelt, who had to decline running for another term in 1908, wanted to do so in 1912. His successor, William H. Taft, had moved the party in a conservative direction, violating Roosevelt's progressive spirit. Roosevelt announced his candidacy on June 7 and won nearly every primary election. The Republican National Committee and state caucuses, however, favored and protected the incumbent. Of the 254 contested convention seats, the national committee awarded 235 to Taft and 19 to Roosevelt.

In an unprecedented move, Roosevelt arrived in Chicago and directed his forces from beyond the convention hall. After the misallocation of his delegates, he instructed his supporters to abstain from voting. "The parting of ways has come," he claimed, and the party must stand "for the rights of humanity, or else it must stand for special privilege." The Rough Rider's supporters remained in the hall to protest, rubbing sandpaper together and blowing horns to simulate the steamroller that had unfairly flattened their candidate. Taft won re-nomination, and Roosevelt's supporters bolted to create the Progressive party. That November, Roosevelt spoiled the election for President Taft and handed the plurality of popular votes, and thus the majority of electoral votes, to Democrat Woodrow Wilson.

1924 Democrats

The division and standoff in Chicago in 1912 was a mild matinee act compared to the Democratic drama that played out in New York's old Madison Square Garden in 1924. What author Robert K. Murray called "the most acrimonious and bitterly fought event in the Democratic Party's modern history," required 103 ballots over 17 days.

The Democrat party was divided into rural and urban factions, represented respectively by William McAdoo of California and Governor Al Smith of New York. Smith, an Irish-Catholic, opposed prohibition and embodied the political characteristics that McAdoo's Protestant, tea-totaling crowd could not accept. After 66 ballots with no candidate in range of the two-thirds requirement, delegates offered motions to meet in executive session to hear directly from the candidates, to drop the lowest vote-getter after each round, and to reconvene in Kansas City two weeks later. None of these motions passed. McAdoo finally

withdrew and John W. Davis was placed in nomination. Davis was a noted West Virginia lawyer and two-term congressman. He also had served as U.S. solicitor general and ambassador to England, a classic stepping-stone to the presidency. He gradually moved to the front of the pack as the compromise candidate.

In addition to the split on candidates, an intense platform debate surfaced when Northern delegates introduced a plank to denounce the Ku Klux Klan. Almost all rural and Southern delegates voted against the measure, and nearly all Northern urban delegates voted for it in the closest convention vote ever. It failed. Both the nomination fight and the ugly Klan discussion were broadcast on radio, to the embarrassment of the party.

In the general election, Davis and his party were trounced. The electoral map could not be more telling. Every state from the Old Confederacy voted Democrat; all others voted Republican, save Wisconsin, which voted for favorite son Robert LaFollette of the Progressive party.

1952 Republicans

In 1952, conservative Ohio Senator Robert Taft, the former president's son, sought the nomination as he had done twice before. This time he faced a popular effort to nominate political newcomer General Dwight Eisenhower. Party regulars supported Taft, while pragmatic Republicans felt the former Supreme Commander of World War II could deliver a November victory. The majority threshold that year was 604 votes. On the first ballot Eisenhower received 595 votes, Taft 500, and California Governor Earl Warren and others split the remainder. Before a second official vote could be taken, Minnesota switched its first-ballot votes to Eisenhower because Minnesota Governor Harold Stassen did not meet the required 10 percent minimum threshold that year. It took Eisenhower over the hump and the other states followed. Officially winning on the first ballot, it has been commonly alleged that Eisenhower, or his forces, promised the next Supreme Court opening to Warren (which would be one of the notable back-room deals in American political history).

It all ended in apparent harmony. "General Eisenhower and Senator Taft already have met," the *New York Times* reported the following day, "Senator Taft has pledged his unlimited and active support to elect Dwight Eisenhower."

continued on page 86

1968 Democrats

The Democrats gathered in 1968 as support for the Vietnam War faded. Anti-war candidates Senator Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy had won the most primary votes. An unpopular incumbent, Lyndon Johnson refused re-nomination, so his vice president, Hubert Humphrey, declared his candidacy. Kennedy was assassinated immediately after winning the California primary. As the convention met later in Chicago, images of protest, police violence, and overall division reached 16.5 million living rooms. Though Johnson had quit the race, his legacy was at stake and his machinery was in action. A platform proposal to not bomb North Vietnam pitted the factions against each other and outraged LBJ. This and the bloody scenes in the streets made for

terrible optics. Heavy-handed Chicago Mayor Richard Daley's police cracked down on protestors while the political boss faced off with anti-war delegates in the hall. CBS reporter Dan Rather was punched and knocked to the floor. Senator Abraham Ribicoff of Connecticut denounced the "Gestapo tactics in the streets of Chicago," only to get an earful of obscenities from Daley. The tumultuous scene drove voters away from the party and handed the November victory to Richard Nixon. It was also the watershed moment for a redesign of the convention process.

For further reading: James Chase, *1912: Wilson, Roosevelt, Taft & Debs—The Election that Changed the Country* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004); Robert K. Murray, *The 103rd Ballot* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); Leonard Lurie, *The King Makers* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, Inc., 1971); Theodore White, *The Making of a President 1968* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1969).



Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush is joined on the stage by his wife Laura, left, his running mate Dick Cheney and his wife Lynne, right, at the conclusion of the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia, August 3, 2000.

The concern for projecting a good image on television has made conventions less deliberative, less newsworthy, and more scripted than ever. Drafted platforms typically arrive already written and agreed upon. Since a banging gavel is a sign of disorder, procedural rules limit the gavel's use. Speeches are filtered by many hands, loaded into a teleprompter, and timed to coincide

with pre-planned audience chants. The parties invest millions for this general election campaign kickoff, seeking to attract those independent voters who might determine which party's candidate to support while watching convention coverage. By 1980, the main networks covered only the prime time segment, and after 2000 only carried the final hour each night.⁷

With such scripted and predetermined nominations, do the 2016 conventions even matter, and what are the chances of a brokered convention this summer? Let's consider some recent trends, current rules, and possibilities.

To win the Republican nomination, a candidate must win 1,237 of the 2,472 votes. Republicans award each state a mix of delegates: ten at-large, three per congressional district, bonus delegates for winning the prior presidential election and for the state's total number of major Republican officeholders, and automatic seats for the state's two Republican National Committee members and the state chairperson. Thirty-nine states or territories hold Republican primary elections, and seventeen determine delegates via caucus or state convention. About 82 percent of the GOP delegates will come from primary states, and 18 percent will arrive from the remainder.

The Democrats have 4,763 delegates, making 2,382 votes necessary to win. For each state's congressional districts, the Democrats allot delegates based on formulas that consider population, party performance in the prior elec-

tions, and Democrat voter registration. In a typical state, that can range from 20 delegates representing a heavily urban area to six from a safe Republican district, though all congressional districts contain roughly the same population. In addition, the Democratic Party gives “superdelegate” status to all Democratic members of Congress, members of the DNC, and distinguished party leaders (governors and big-city mayors). These superdelegates are unbound and free to vote for whichever candidate they want. This year they constitute 712 or about 15 percent of the total. For the 4,051 pledged delegates, 41 states or territories hold Democratic primaries to determine 87 percent of the delegates; the other localities use caucuses to name 13 percent. The caucus system offers both Republican and Democratic state parties more control over who participates and in choosing a date, but primaries are state-funded and generate a higher turnout.⁸

The parties continually tinker with the primary season calendar and have frontloaded state contests to bring an earlier decision. FDR in 1932 was the last candidate to emerge from a multi-ballot convention and make it to the White House. If too many states were to rush to hold their primaries in January, this would prevent a deliberative process and discount the input of most primary voters across the nation. So the parties have given selected states an early voice, and later states a potentially meaningful voice, while they have tried to maximize the chances for a presumptive nominee before the national conventions.

The RNC allows states to hold winner-take-all contests, but this year has mandated a ‘proportionality window,’ March 1 to March 14, where those 21 states and territories holding elections then must award delegates proportionally. This strategy encourages a competitive race through the early contests, then perhaps a more decisive outcome after March 15. And, it should be noted, proportional allocation of delegates for

Conventional Quiz

1. What political party held the 1st national presidential nominating convention? When? In what city?
2. Which convention produced and presented the first platform?
3. What nominee was elected after the greatest number of required ballots?
4. In what year did the last “brokered convention” take place?
5. What was the first convention to be broadcast on radio?
6. What was the first convention to be broadcast live on television?
7. At what convention did the nominee first accept the nomination in person?
8. What candidates challenged incumbent presidents for the nomination in 1976, 1980, and 1992?
9. What resulted in the above three cases?
10. What year marked the point when both major parties’ primary elections determined over half of the convention delegates?
11. At what time did Democratic nominee George McGovern deliver his acceptance speech in 1972?
12. What city has hosted the most major national party conventions?

Answers are on page 88

Table 1. Total Cumulative Pledged Delegates Determined by Popular Vote

	Democrats*	Republicans
March 31	2,304	1,633
April 30	3,035	1,970
May 31	3,270	2,169
June 14	4,051	2,472

*Does not include the 712 superdelegates

both parties after a state primary election or caucus is almost never precisely proportional. The Democrats require a 15-percent threshold to award any delegates from a state. The Republicans make thresholds optional, and states can set these as high as 20 percent. In other cases, intricate and varying rules in “proportional” contests in both par-

ties prevent precisely accurate vote-to-delegate ratios. An expert on primaries, Josh Putnam, who writes the political blog Frontloading HQ, predicted before the primary season began that candidates in both camps would likely clinch the nomination between the points when 50 and 75 percent of the delegates are allocated—between mid-

March and late April for the GOP and between late March and early May for the Democrats.⁹ However, the intense competition that has taken place in both parties has increased the possibility of at least one brokered convention this year.¹⁰ Both parties have popular figures who could emerge as compromise candidates—think House Speaker Paul Ryan or Vice President Joe Biden.

If you are teaching a U.S. History or Government course, past pivotal nominating conventions (mostly before the TV era) make for good historical drama. Entire books cover the more notable ones, and Congressional Quarterly's *National Party Conventions 1831–2008* provides overviews, voting data, and platform excerpts, worthy to be on any social studies teacher's reference shelf. Conventions follow a standard recipe with primary sources as their

key ingredients, suitable for student analysis. It is often possible to find resources online, such as the convention record, the platform, balloting on platform planks and nominees, and acceptance speeches. History students could re-enact an historic convention, especially one of those described in the sidebar. Several hour-long documentaries recount those from the television era. Another project option for the 2016 quest is to form student groups and assign each to follow a candidate and occasionally present updates and analyses.

Possible individual writing assignments include predictions, endorsements, op-eds, commercial scripts, or stump speeches geared for particular audiences in upcoming state primary elections. Alternatively, students could assume the role of campaign strategists and create a plan for the states that remain. The ambitious teacher could devise a classroom simulation where students serve as selected state delegations and prime time convention speakers, followed by a vote across classes guided by unique student-created nominating rules.¹¹

The national political conventions still guide the way Americans name the main contenders for the top political office. This complicated system can be challenging at times, but we owe it to our students and ourselves to closely examine it as we study the current presidential race. 🌍

Notes

1. John C. Green and John S. Jackson, "Party Profiles: National Convention Delegates" in *Rewiring Politics: Presidential Nominating Conventions in the Media Age*, ed. Costas Panagopoulos (Baton Rouge, La.: LSU Press, 2007).
2. Stan M. Haynes, *The First American Political Conventions: Transforming Presidential Nominations, 1832–1872* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2012), 19–31, 34.
3. Haynes, 19–31.
4. Tom Price, "Political Conventions: Have They Outlived Their Usefulness?" *CQ Researcher* 18 (August 8, 2008).
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.; *National Party Conventions 1831–1976* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1979); Joseph Nathan Kane, *Presidential Fact Book* (New York: Random House, 1998); CQ

Press, *National Party Conventions 1831–2008* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2009).

7. Panagopoulos, *Rewiring Politics: Presidential Nominating Conventions in the Media Age*; Terri Susan Fine, "Mass Media and the Democratization of Presidential Nominating Conventions," in *Rewiring Politics*.
8. For official RNC rules and procedures check out www.gop.org, where the party provides a clear but brief explanation, interactive map, and calendar. The DNC's nominating procedures and rules can be found in a PDF at Josh Putnam's excellent blog Frontloading HQ, www.frontloading.blogspot.com. Additional information and perspective comes from this author's telephone interview with Bill Dora, Ohio Democratic Party convention and delegate official, February 22, 2016.
9. Josh Putnam, "Everything You Need to Know about How the Presidential Primary Works," *Washington Post* (May 12, 2015), online.
10. There are several good websites that provide results from state primaries and the most recent delegate count. Consider Real Clear Politics and the *New York Times*: www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/democratic_delegate_count.html; www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/us/elections/primary-calendar-and-results.html?_r=3. The superdelegate tally is based on public endorsements, donations, and other reasoned conclusions, though superdelegates have until that first ballot to decide.
11. The University of California-Santa Barbara's Presidency Project provides all past platforms, acceptance speeches, and other primary sources, data, and tools related to nominating conventions and presidential elections. Documentaries can be found at Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) and on Amazon.com.

Answers to Conventional Quiz on p. 87

1. The Anti-Masonic Party, 1831, in Baltimore
2. The 1840 Democratic convention
3. Democrat John W. Davis in 1924
4. The 1952 Democratic convention
5. The 1924 Republican convention
6. 1940, though limited to the New York area; the 1948 conventions aired nationally
7. 1932: Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt
8. Ronald Reagan challenged Gerald Ford, Ted Kennedy challenged Jimmy Carter, Pat Buchanan challenged George H.W. Bush.
9. The incumbent president received the nomination, then lost the general election.
10. 1972
11. 3:00AM
12. Chicago (25)

DAVID WOLFFORD teaches government and politics at Mariemont High School in Cincinnati. He is the author of *United States Government and Politics: Preparing for the Advanced Placement Examination. (AMSCO/Perfection Learning)*. His websites are www.usgopo.com and www.davidwolfford.com.