Introduction to How Political Conventions Work


The political convention is a uniquely American tradition, one that is focused on the political parties that have defined Americans' choices in government for nearly 175 years. Political conventions, and the party system they are an integral part of, are not mentioned in the U.S. Constitution. Indeed, the founding fathers of American government viewed political parties with distrust or outright hostility. Yet today, Americans can hardly imagine a government without political parties, and the parties' conventions are enormous, televised media events.

In this article, we'll learn how political conventions came about, how they have changed, and what they are used for. We'll also look at some famous events at political conventions in American history.

Functions of Conventions

Originally, the main purpose of political conventions was to nominate the party's candidate for president. In the 1800s, the movement in the United States was to place more political power directly in the hands of the citizens. Political conventions were one way of doing this: Previously, candidates were nominated in secret caucuses by members of Congress; candidates would now be chosen by delegates who were selected at the state or county level by the party members.

The democratization of presidential elections eventually took the nominating function away from the conventions. People wanted more direct control over their party's nominees, so the presidential primaries came into use (although some states still use caucuses). Party members vote in the primaries to choose whom they want to represent their party in the upcoming election. By the time of the convention, there is no suspense about who will be the nominee -- it has been known for months.

Political conventions serve other purposes beyond nominating the party candidate, which is why they're still around. The convention offers party members a chance to gather together and discuss the party's platform. The platform is the party's stance on the political issues of the day. For a long time, the convention was a place for political debate, and important decisions were made there. In 1860, the Democratic Party debated the government's right to outlaw slavery. When the party adopted the position that the Supreme Court could decide the slavery issue, delegates from several southern states walked out, resulting in the Southern Democratic Party. In 1980, Senator Edward Kennedy fought against incumbent Jimmy Carter's economic plan. Although Carter defeated Kennedy for the nomination, Kennedy's debate forced Carter to radically change his plan.

Today, even this function of the convention has been largely stripped away. The conventions have been streamlined, with important events and speeches scheduled for prime-time television hours. The parties work to eliminate any evidence of debate or disunity within the party. The political conventions have now been reduced to the status of infomercials, marketing the ideas and personalities of the party to the public. While the conventions serve to unify the party and generate party pride, the "advertisement for the party" has become the primary function of political conventions today.

Now we'll look at who gets to go to the conventions, and what they do there.

Media at the Conventions

The original closed-door caucuses in the early 1800s were mentioned only briefly in newspapers, and only through indirect accounts. As the process became more open, media coverage became more widespread. The often chaotic atmosphere of the conventions was difficult to get across in a printed article, however.
That changed when television arrived. Suddenly, the circus of a national party convention was broadcast into homes around the country. Every floor debate, interruption, protest and delegate squabble was there for public viewing. This gradually led to the changes in the primaries we see today -- no more debates or arguments, no unplanned speeches or interruptions, and protesters are kept miles away from the convention floor. Now, the convention is a media event, attended by almost as many reporters as delegates, and broadcast in carefully selected prime-time viewing slots.

Nuts and Bolts of Political Conventions

The national political conventions are made up of delegates from each state. Those delegates are selected in different ways, depending on the party and the state. The key here is that the delegates are not only party members; they are supporters of a particular candidate.

The Democrats use a proportional system, in which the percentage of party members in favor of a candidate in the primary or caucus is reflected in the percentage of delegates representing that candidate who will be sent to the convention. For example, if two candidates split the primary vote, then each gets half of the delegate positions for that state.

Republicans favor a winner-take-all system, although they do allow states the option of using a proportional system. Under a winner-take-all system, the candidate with the majority of votes in the primary or caucus gets all of the state's delegate seats.

Deciding how many delegates each state gets is a very complicated process. Essentially, the number is based on the state's population, as well as how much support that state has given to party candidates in recent elections.

Now we know who gets to go; but how do they decide where they're going? In the age of modern travel and mass communications, the national conventions no longer need to be held in centrally located cities. The main factors today are:

- **Infrastructure** - Does the city have the hotel and convention space, as well as the public transportation, needed to host thousands of people?
- **Security** - Can the site be adequately protected from terrorists or protesters?
- **Funding** - Can the city provide the millions of dollars in additional funding that the parties typically receive from the host city?
- **Preference** - According to Congressional Quarterly, "for the party that controls the White House, often the overriding factor in site selection is the president's personal preference."

What do today's delegates do at the convention? They may discuss party issues, listen to speeches, and participate in party "pep rallies." But for the most part, nothing political actually happens at political conventions in the 21st century. The convention concludes with a carefully planned speech by the party's nominee for president.

Historic Conventions

Perhaps the most infamous political convention was the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago (see below), but there have been other important events at conventions. In 1888, abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass became the first black person to receive a vote at a political convention -- a single vote at the Republican convention.

In 1908, Democrats added legislation to their platform that would separate the interests of corporations from those of Republicans. They felt that corporations and the Republicans were too closely allied, a theme that remains relevant almost 100 years later.
In 1940, two unique events occurred at political conventions. First, Franklin D. Roosevelt was nominated for a third term as president. After some debate over his choice of vice president, he accepted. Second, the Republicans held the first ever televised convention that year.

The 2000 Democratic Convention in Los Angeles was marked by extensive protests in support of numerous causes. Pro-union, gay rights, anti-corporate welfare, pro-environmental and other movements made their voices heard a good distance from the convention site, due to the heavy presence of security fences and police officers. A performance by the politically active rock group Rage Against the Machine was interrupted by police, who used pepper spray and fired rubber bullets at fleeing spectators.

In the next section, we'll take a look at how political conventions got started in the first place.

History of Political Conventions

Despite the reluctance of the early leaders of the United States to accept political parties, two had sprung up within a few decades of the country's founding. These initial parties were loosely defined, and it's difficult to pinpoint exactly when they came into being. By the late 1790s, however, the parties were becoming more organized and taking a greater role in American politics.

From 1796 to 1824, candidates for presidential elections were chosen by congressional caucuses -- that is, the members of Congress for a given party gathered together and decided whom to nominate for the presidential election. The electoral college system was then used to choose the president from among the candidates.

The caucus system began to break down because the American people felt that it took too much power out of their hands. In 1816 and 1820, they were right. The Federalist Party had collapsed, leaving only one political party -- the Democratic-Republican Party (this party is not related in any way to the Democrats and Republicans of today). As a result, whoever was nominated by the Democratic-Republican caucus would be guaranteed to win the presidency. James Monroe won in 1816, and was similarly unopposed in 1820. Americans protested the caucus system around the nation.

That period of single-party rule not only led to political conventions, but also created the feeling that a two-party system was crucial to American politics. During the transition period, after the death of caucuses but before conventions were instituted, state legislatures nominated presidential candidates.

Ironically, the first political convention was held by a third party, the Anti-Mason Party, in 1831. Soon after, the National Republicans and the Democrats also began holding conventions. In these early days, the conventions were often held as much as a year prior to the election because transportation was so difficult. For this same reason, they were usually held in centrally located cities. Baltimore held most of the early conventions, while Chicago became the most popular host after the Civil War.

Today, presidential primaries have made the conventions unnecessary for practical purposes. They exist primarily as a marketing tool and a political pep rally, where each party puts on a well-choreographed show.

Answer on notebook paper:

1. What was the original purpose of political conventions?

2. In what ways did the development of presidential primaries change the function of conventions?

3. What are the purposes of political conventions today?

4. What is a party platform?
5. What happened to the role of debate in conventions and why do you think this is the case?

6. How has the role of the media influenced what takes place at conventions?

7. What are delegates?

8. How does the selection of delegates for the Democratic and Republican Party differ?

9. What determines the number of delegates a state receives?

10. How are each Party’s convention locations selected?

11. What do convention delegates do at the conventions?

12. Of the historic conventions mentioned, which do you think would have been most interesting to attend and why?

13. Although primaries have made conventions unnecessary for practical reasons, what purposes do they still serve?