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Before Modern Conventions

How were presidential candidates originally nominated? And when did conventions take over the process?*

The U.S. Constitution says nothing about how presidential candidates are to be nominated. There is not a word about political parties, caucuses, primaries, or conventions. The process has changed considerably over time and has become part of the nation's "unwritten constitution."

GEORGE WASHINGTON

To understand how the quirky process evolved, you have to go back to the beginning, to George Washington, the colossus of the new nation; the man who was "First in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen." We all know how widespread that sentiment was, but rarely do we think through what it meant. What it meant, politically, was that Washington had no opponent when he was asked to become the nation's first president. So there was no need for political parties to nominate candidates so long as he was willing to serve as president. Both in 1789 and in 1793, the gentleman-planter from Mount Vernon was unanimously chosen by the Electoral College to be president of the United States.



EARLY PARTIES AND KING CAUCUS

Washington admonished the new republic to be unified; it should not be torn asunder by factions (parties). During his years in office, Washington was able to keep a fairly tight rein on his contentious cabinet. Still, by the second term, deep divisions were apparent, and the nation's first political parties were starting to form -- Federalists around Hamilton and Adams, and Democratic-Republicans around Jefferson and Madison. As a result, when Washington retired and there was no consensus on who should succeed him, the newly emerging political parties rushed into the vacuum. The Constitution being silent on the question of how to select candidates for high office, party leaders had to make up the rules as they went along. Beginning with the election of 1796, leaders in Congress divided into two camps -- a Federalist caucus and a Democratic-Republican caucus. The two caucuses nominated their presidential and vice presidential candidates. Rank-and-file Congressmen had little say in the process. Ordinary Americans had no say in the process. A small club determined who could run for president, and "King Caucus" lorded over presidential politics.

The early caucus system survived for almost three decades because the Founders were not keen on democracy; from their reading of ancient Greek and Roman authors, they believed that democracies were susceptible to mob rule. Representative republics were a superior form of governance. So our nation's Founders did not mind that an elite group of powerful men essentially hand-picked presidential candidates.

CRISIS POINT: 1824

Despite the wisdom of the Founders, problems with the caucus system were not long in coming. During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, the Federalist party grew increasingly bankrupt of ideas and energy -- it got so bad that Federalists didn't even nominate a candidate for the 1820 election. This meant that whomever the Democratic-Republican caucus nominated would be handed the presidency on a platter. Without citizen input. Without public debate. Without competition. In 1820 James Monroe ran for re-election virtually unopposed, and to put the best face on the fact, his presidential years were dubbed the "Era of Good Feelings."

Dissatisfaction with King Caucus erupted in 1824. By that point, the caucus system had aroused trenchant criticism, even among some Democratic-Republicans who were in the catbird seat. In 1824, several men were popular enough to have a shot at the presidency, above all, Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams. But do you think King Caucus dubbed either of these two men? No. The caucus instead chose Secretary of the Treasury William Crawford to run. The subsequent election was one of the more colorful in U.S. history, to be sure, but it made little sense to most Americans. Jackson received the most popular votes; he also received a plurality of votes in the Electoral College. But he could not become president outright because he failed to win a majority of electoral votes. That's because Old Hickory was competing not only against Adams and Crawford, but also against Henry Clay, who had thrown his hat into the ring. As not one of these four men had a clear majority in the Electoral College, the election was thrown into the House of Representatives, which selected John Quincy Adams to be the nation's sixth president. So much for King Caucus, which had dubbed Crawford. (Remember him?)

Few Americans were happy with the process. So upset was Jackson that he called for abolishing the Electoral College, and while reformers were at it, the caucus system as well.

FIRST POLITICAL CONVENTIONS: 1831-1832

From the tumult of these early years, King Caucus was allowed to die. It was replaced by the convention system that in theory (and eventually in practice) would give more people the chance to influence the nominating process. Andrew Jackson's candidacy was supported by mass meetings and state conventions as early as 1828. But the first *national* convention was held in 1831, when the Anti-Masonic party met in a Baltimore saloon. Jackson's Democratic supporters liked the idea so much that they met one year later in that same saloon. The events that unfolded in Baltimore in 1832 look modern in outline: delegates attended from the states; they nominated a presidential candidate (Jackson) and his running mate (Martin Van Buren); they drew up a party platform.

Many people of that day reckoned that open, public conventions would give more citizens a voice in the nominating process. Alas, the best laid plans....

It turned out that the new method of selecting candidates was not really open to ordinary Americans. Yes, there were delegates who got to vote. But conventions were under the control of small but powerful cliques of state and local party leaders who had screened and handpicked most delegates. Dramatic moments were frequent, however, as competing candidates for the party's nomination showed up. They had to go behind the scenes to make deals to secure enough delegate votes to win the nomination. This was the era of the proverbial smoke-filled room. The nominating process was ruled by party bosses who brokered conventions.

CONVENTIONS REFORMED

Smoke-filled rooms, party bosses, political machines, brokered conventions -- was this the best the greatest democracy in the world could do? Toward the end of the 19th century, there was growing dissatisfaction with a nominating process that was in the hands of so few men. The Progressive movement arose in the first decades of the 20th century to confront a host of challenges -- economic and social as well as electoral. Indeed, some of the Progressive-era reforms passed almost a century ago influence party conventions to this day. For example, states passed laws that allowed voters to select candidates in primaries. This method gave ordinary citizens the chance to voice their preference. The results in most cases were binding. By 1916, almost half the states had adopted the primary system.

Despite reforms, presidential nominations were still the domain of party bosses and hand-picked delegates to national conventions. Rank-and-file voters were not yet in the driver's seat. Most conventions were brokered by factional party leaders committed to favorite sons. Two examples illustrate. In 1952, the Democratic National Convention chose Adlai Stevenson to be the party's nominee, even though Estes Kefauver had won more than three-fifths of the votes in the primaries. In 1968, the infamous Democratic National Convention in Chicago gave the nod to Hubert Humphrey even though he had not actively run in the primaries.

Conventions in the 1960s could be fairly raucous, reflecting the temper of the decade. Already noted were the Democrats in Chicago, who were anything but neatly packaged as they tried to deal with urban violence, protesting youth, the Vietnam War, and the recent assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. Delegates were overshadowed by riots, and outnumbered by 11,900 Chicago police; 7,500 Army troops; 7,500 Illinois National Guardsmen; and 1,000 Secret Service agents [\[1\]](#)

Four years earlier, in 1964, the GOP had its share of tumult when meeting in San Francisco's Cow Palace. Their convention saw moderate Nelson

Rockefeller booed and heckled, and conservative nominee Barry Goldwater assert that extremism in the pursuit of liberty is no vice.^[2]

Since 1972, a new wave of change has given conventions the look they have today. One change has been the decline of party machines. Another has been the rise of campaign finance rules that sidestepped organized parties. A third has occurred as more states adopted the primary election system to choose delegates and sort out candidates. As William Safire points out, "By 1972, the proliferation of primaries ... made brokerage more difficult, though not impossible."^[3]

RECENT POLITICAL CONVENTIONS

Major party conventions today lack the drama of those in years past, no doubt about it. Conventions nowadays are about speeches, about marketing a candidate and selling a party; they are usually not the venue in which momentous decisions are made.

The last truly exciting conventions occurred in 1980 at both party convocations. Democratic delegates, meeting in New York City, were divided between Senator Edward Kennedy and incumbent President Jimmy Carter. Although Carter won on the first ballot, Kennedy gave one of the most memorable speeches in Democratic convention history.

Also in 1980 the Republican convention meeting in Detroit provided excitement because, at the beginning of the convention, no one -- not even Ronald Reagan -- was sure who the vice presidential running mate would be. In Detroit there was a tense all-nighter in which Reagan tried to persuade former President Gerald Ford to be his running mate. The idea was that Reagan and Ford would be "co-presidents." Speculation ran rampant through the night, Americans tuned in, and several politicians went on national TV to proclaim that Ford had accepted the offer. Not so. In the wee hours it was learned that George H. W. Bush and Reagan came to an agreement.

Reagan, by the way, provided drama at an earlier convention that involved Gerald Ford. In the 1976 GOP convention in Kansas City, the former California governor made a serious run at incumbent Ford. After Ford narrowly won nomination at the convention, Reagan's numerous delegates chanted for Reagan to return to the floor and make a speech. Reagan answered the call -- and overshadowed the nominee -- with a rousing extemporaneous speech about leadership. The crowd went wild, and Reagan and the nation knew he'd be back in 1980.

2004

Columbia University presidential historian Alan Brinkley observes that "political conventions have not been decision-making forums for half a century." But that may change in 2004. The Democratic convention in Boston and Republican convention in New York are "the first in more than 30 years to coincide with the combination of war, crisis, and bitter political division."^[4]

(Question from Craig H. of San Jose, California)

* Full question: I've heard that presidential candidates were not always nominated in national conventions. How were presidential candidates originally nominated? And when did conventions take over the process?

^[1] 2004 Democratic National Convention Official Site, "Past Conventions," at <http://www.dems2004.org/site/apps/lk/content2.asp?c=lu12LaPYG&b=118243>

^[2] Alan Brinkley, "Is Democracy Still Welcome in the Hall?" *New York Times*, July 25, 2004, section 15 ("Boston"), p. 3.

^[3] William Safire, *Safire's New Political Dictionary* (Random House: New York, 1993), s.v. "brokered convention," p. 86.

^[4] Brinkley, "Is Democracy," p. 3.