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The Value of Conventions

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The Value of Conventions

Don't we already know who is running for president in November?*

You do sound a titch cynical -- don't be. Thank goodness Democrats and Republicans still hold conventions, because they are a sign that our democracy is not falling apart. Indeed, major party conventions serve six important functions:



1. Conventions are important markers on the calendar. Occurring in the summer, they signal the end of the primary season and the beginning of the general election contest in which every American has a stake.

2. Conventions and the parties they represent are the way Americans have long organized and channeled political disputes. They certainly beat the alternatives seen elsewhere around the globe -- little things like tribal wars, putsches, revolutions, assassinations, and mobs at the barricades. We should be grateful that our politics are so relatively genteel.

3. Conventions give a nominee valuable rehearsal time to think presidentially, play the part, and hone the message. And -- perhaps more important -- the nominee's performance gives TV viewers the opportunity to judge how fit the individual is to be president. Look at it as a kind of job interview. You might argue, correctly, that any appearance the nominee makes is highly choreographed and scripted. Well, aren't most job interviews highly scripted too? A nominee must learn to *act* the part of president. They must remain cool in the pressure cooker. Presidents from George Washington to Ronald Reagan appreciated that acting and role playing are an important part of the job description.

4. Speaking of job description: one of the modern president's jobs is to be his party's leader. It did not used to be this way -- George Washington earnestly desired that the president be above faction or party. Nowadays, conventions ratify a party's decision about who will lead them. The nominee is a flesh-and-blood projection of the party platform and the ideas, principles, and policies they believe in.

5. Related to the previous point, I should add that conventions give party leaders the opportunity to excite supporters -- to "energize the base." They usually draw sharp distinctions with the other party. This quadrennial infusion of enthusiasm keeps people engaged in our democracy.

6. Conventions also showcase not just what is strictly "Republican" or "Democratic," but what is American -- and not only with rah-rah speeches. Conventions are about ideas and leaders. Americans should tune in so that they can judge for themselves which party, which nominee, best expresses the promise of our nation. Ultimately, conventions offer a valuable civics lesson to American citizens who will make a solemn decision in November.

It is easy to become cynical about politics while watching made-for-television conventions. But, again, I urge you to consider the alternative. Would you rather that our presidential nominees be picked in the proverbial smoke-filled room, out of democracy's sight? In America we enjoy a fairly transparent process of caucuses and primaries that forces candidates out into the open. It may not be the prettiest process, but it's probably the best in the world for learning about candidates and winnowing nominees. And since you write from Boston (which is, coincidentally, where I currently write from), I remind you of a hallowed bit of Beantown history that illustrates the importance of visibility in a representative government. Your Old State House is where, in John Adams's words, "the child Independence was born." The debates on the hated Stamp Act of 1766 took place there, behind closed doors. To shine light on the deliberations, members of the House of Representatives (who were sympathetic to the colonists, not the Crown) had a gallery built so that citizens could observe their sessions. This was a revolutionary step. It was the first time in modern history that ordinary citizens could watch their government at work: the C-Span of the 18th century.

So watch the convention in Boston, learn from it, judge it. As a Bostonian and as an American, you enjoy a remarkable tradition.

(Question from Caroline of Boston, Massachusetts)

* Full question: I'm from Boston and our city is about to be overwhelmed by the Democratic party faithful who will be holding their convention in the Fleet Center. Maybe I'm cynical, but why do the parties go through the hoopla of conventions any more? Don't we already know who is running for president in November?