



Party On!

Every four years, America's political parties gather to formally nominate their candidates for president. Why should the fact that the candidates have been known for weeks, and are already campaigning against each other, spoil the chance of a good party?

Balloons and bands playing in a big hall, TV reporters shouting questions to interviewees who are distracted by all the noise and hoopla, people wearing funny hats and waving flags, a chance for Americans to see folks from all across the country tell something special about their home states as they cast their support for their party's presidential nominee, charts with numbers totting up on the TV screen until, finally, the "magic number" of delegates has been reached and the Republican, or Democratic, party officially has a presidential nominee.

After waiting in a nearby hotel room or convention center suite, the candidate, his or her family and the vice presidential running mate, and that person's family, appear on stage to wild cheers. The balloons are released, the spouses are kissed and every-

one raises their hands together for the same happy photo taken every four years.

This is the scene Americans see when they watch on television the conventions held by the two major political parties every four years to formally nominate their choices for president and vice president. It may seem a little silly, because nowadays the person who has won the most delegates is known weeks in advance. But it still gives a chance for the party to showcase its candidates, not only for president and vice

president, but for the U.S. Congress and for state elections, and to focus on differences with the opposition.

Highlights of the conventions include a rousing keynote speech by party leaders, usually the announcement of the nominee's vice presidential candidate, the roll call of delegate votes by the state delegations, and the final negotiation and ratification of the party platform (the document that states its positions and plans).

In the past, there was usually more

Far left: John McCain with his running mate, Sarah Palin, at the Republican National Convention in St. Paul, Minnesota. Left: Joe Biden (from left), his wife, Jill, Michelle and Barack Obama at the Democratic National Convention in Denver, Colorado.

excitement, as the chairman of each state delegation would rise, and after the horns stopped hooting and the flags stopped swooshing overhead, would announce how many delegate votes were being cast. And it was fun to hear something about that state's official pie or favorite bird or industry. If the primary and caucus voting was close, there would be huddled meetings throughout the convention center, as candidates' representatives tried to woo some of the uncommitted, and even the committed delegates. Sometimes, a losing candidate would agree to let the vote be unanimous in return for some pet policy being included in the party platform, or being chosen as the vice presidential nominee, or promised a Cabinet post.

But even as the process of selecting candidates has evolved over the decades into a show that most U.S. television networks no longer cover "gavel to gavel," surprises can emerge. In 2004, a big surprise was the stirring speech delivered by a young state senator from Illinois, Barack Obama, who in that moment made his appearance on the national stage. Four years later, he is the Democratic Party's presidential nominee.

The U.S. Constitution provides no rules for how political parties select their candidates. In fact, there were no political parties when the Constitution was written in the late 1700s.

But by 1796, members of the U.S. Congress were identifying with one or another of the political parties of the time, and meeting informally to agree on their party's presidential and vice presidential nominees. Known as King Caucus, this system for selecting party candidates continued until 1824. It broke down because of the decentralization of power in politics that accompanied the westward expansion of the United States.

Eventually, the caucus was replaced by national nominating conventions. The first one was held in 1831 by a minor party, the Anti-Masons, who met in a saloon in Baltimore, Maryland, to choose candidates and write a platform on which they would

run. The next year, the Democrats met in the same saloon to select their nominees. Since then, the major parties and most minor parties have held nominating conventions, attended by state delegates.

Throughout the 19th and into the 20th century, the presidential nominating conventions, though attended by many of the party faithful, were controlled by state party leaders. These political "bosses" had used their influence to handpick their state's convention delegates—and to make sure that they voted "correctly" at the national party convention. Although there were lengthy public speeches and debates, much business, such as on policy and Cabinet appointments, was conducted by cigarette-smoking party leaders and key supporters in private meetings that became known as smoke-filled rooms, and entered the American language as a political cliché.

At the turn of the century, opponents to the party leaders demanded reforms to permit ordinary voters to select convention

their power, persuaded state legislatures to abolish them on the grounds that they were expensive and that relatively few people participated in them. By 1936, only a dozen states continued to hold presidential primaries.

But democratizing pressures reemerged after World War II. For the first time, television provided a medium through which people could now see the political campaigns in their living rooms. The decades that followed brought reforms to widen participation in party nominating conventions.

As a result, all states now hold primary elections or caucuses, or a combination of both to select delegates to the major party nominating conventions. Depending on the laws of the state and the rules of the party, primary voters may cast a ballot for a candidate, or a slate of delegates pledged to vote for that person at the national convention, or they may be choosing delegates to attend a county or state convention first, with the national convention delegates selected from that group. Although this system takes place over several months, the candidate preferences are essentially determined in the first round of voting.

The size of any state's delegation to the national nominating convention is calculated on the basis of a formula established by each party that includes such considerations as the state's population, its past support for the party's national candidates, and the number of elected officials and party leaders serving in public office from that state. The allocation formula that the Democrats use results in conventions that have about twice as many delegates as those of the Republicans.

One consequence of the changes in the nomination process has been the decreasing importance of the party's climactic, televised, national nominating convention. Today, the presidential nominee is effectively determined by the voters relatively early in the primary elections process. Many Americans tune in only on the last day to watch the acceptance speech of the presidential nominee. That's also a change from the past. Originally, the presidential candidates stayed away from the conventions. But Franklin D. Roosevelt broke that tradition by attending the Democratic Party convention in 1932. It was a good move: He won the nomination, and the presidency.

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Top: Delegates Humberto O'Neal (left) and Lillian Belardo de O'Neal, of the Virgin Islands, at the Republican National Convention.

Above: Fireworks explode on the final day of the Democratic National Convention.

delegates. Primary elections came into being to do just this. By 1916, more than half the states held presidential primaries.

The movement was short-lived, however. Following the end of World War I, party leaders, who knew the primaries were a threat to

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