

Having a **Big** Party:

The National Party Conventions



Supporters of Sen. Barack Obama await his arrival at Invesco Field at Mile High in Denver on Aug. 28, 2008. Fresh from his party's unanimous nomination, Obama was poised to give Democrats a stadium-sized send-off into the fall campaign. (©NTB scanpix)

Madison Square Garden in New York is associated with great sporting events and concerts with artists such as Bruce Springsteen, Madonna and Rihanna. The same can be said about Joe Louis Arena in Detroit, the Xcel Energy Center in Saint Paul and numerous other sports venues around the country. However, arenas such as these, which seat around 20,000 people, are also typical locations for the national conventions of the two major parties in the United States, which are held every four years. This year the

Tampa Bay Times Forum, an arena in Tampa, Florida will host the Republican National Convention from August 27 to August 30. The Democratic National Convention will be held in Charlotte, North Carolina, from September 4 to September 6. The location on the first two days of the Democratic convention is the Time Warner Cable Arena, but on September 6 Barack Obama will deliver his acceptance speech at Bank of America Stadium, which is one of the biggest stadiums in the region.



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Delegates

Big arenas are needed to accommodate thousands of delegates from all over the country. In addition to the delegates, there are some 15,000 members of the media in attendance. The delegates have been selected by their home state or their party to officially select a nominee for the presidency. The delegates can be pledged or unpledged. The pledged delegates are directly bound to candidates, either proportionally or on a winner-take-all basis, based on the election results in primaries and caucuses. In the Democratic National Convention there will be 3,253 pledged delegates and 794 unpledged delegates, or so-called superdelegates. The superdelegates are members of Congress, governors, former presidents and other party leaders who in no way are bound to vote for a certain candidate. Of the 2,286 Republican delegates in the

Republican National Convention, there are only 120 unpledged delegates, who are Republican National Committee members.

The role of the conventions

The primary purpose of the national party conventions is to nominate candidates for the presidency and vice-presidency and to adopt a party platform. Thus the national conventions mark the end of the primary election period and the beginning of the general election campaign. However, present-day conventions rarely involve any real excitement with regard to the nomination process. It is usually known well in advance that one of the candidates for the presidency is bound to win a simple majority of the delegate votes on the first ballot. Early in April 2012, for instance, there was no longer any doubt that Mitt Romney would be nominated by the Republicans as their candidate for the presidency. A sure sign of this was the announcement that Mitt Romney planned to begin raising money jointly with the Republican National Committee in order to prepare for an expensive general-election fight

against President Barack Obama. This was in many ways the real beginning of the general election campaign.

The system of primary elections, which took over as the major nomination system after 1968, is the main reason why the role of the conventions is different from before. The advantage of the primary system is that the nomination process is more open, and you end up with a hardened winner who has been tested along the way. One disadvantage is that candidates speak negatively of other candidates from their own party, month after month. This could have the effect of transferring support to the other party. Another consequence of the primary system is that the nature of the national conventions has been changed. Today, the national party conventions basically confirm the choice made by primary voters.

Still, there is always a chance of a so-called brokered convention in which one candidate does not win the first ballot and does not even stand out as a candidate that is likely to win the second ballot. The Republicans came close to a brokered convention in 1976 when incumbent President Gerald Ford was challenged by Ronald Reagan, whereas the Democrats came close in 1984 when Walter Mondale barely won the first ballot. However, real brokered conventions have not occurred since 1952 for the Democrats and 1948 for the Republicans. Back then brokered conventions involved bargaining in smoke-filled back rooms and party leaders who brokered delegate votes for their own candidates in return

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Primaries and caucuses

Presidential primary elections are organized almost like general elections, which means that voting is done through a secret ballot. Primaries can be both closed and open, or somewhere between. In a typically closed primary only voters that are registered Democrats can vote in the Democratic primary and only registered Republicans can vote in the Republican primary. In an open primary, registered voters can choose

to vote for either party, but they are allowed to vote in only one primary. Caucuses, which are only held in a handful of states, are meetings open to all registered voters of the party. There are different systems for selecting delegates in caucuses, but generally the voters divide themselves into groups according to the candidate they support. Then they are counted.

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for political favors. For the sake of excitement, one might hope for a brokered convention again in the future, although horse-trading has become mostly smoke-free and involves phone calls and texting on BlackBerrys. A brokered convention would also make excellent reality TV, and it could draw a lot of attention to the party in question. The conventional wisdom, however, is that this would be a disaster for the party.

Instead, a lot of money and time is put into these events in order to promote party unity and display enthusiasm. Each party has a federally set budget of some \$18 million to produce the conventions as great media events, which also includes use of social-media strategies related to Twitter, Facebook and Google-Plus pages. National conventions have gone from being real news events to showcases and media spectacles. Some people have even called the conventions *infomercials*, which is the term used for paid programming or teleshopping.

Prime time scheduling

The Democrats held their first convention in 1832; whereas the Republicans held their first convention in 1856 (the Republican party was founded in 1854). In the beginning, only a few hundred delegates attended the conventions, and the selection

of delegates was rather informal. So was the scheduling of ballots and speeches, but live broadcasting has gradually changed that. Radio coverage of the conventions started in 1924, and television coverage started in 1940. Earlier presidential candidates did not even show up at the convention to accept the nomination, but the delivery of the candidate's acceptance speech is now the highlight of the convention.

More choreographed conventions have eventually made conventions less interesting for the media, but conventions did not stop being exciting after World War II. Perhaps the most memorable, or infamous, convention ever was the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968. Most of all this convention is remembered for the violence between Vietnam War protesters and the police outside the convention hall. However, the Vietnam War also dominated the atmosphere in the convention itself, with daily shouting matches between delegates. Although Vice President Hubert Humphrey, publicly a defender of the war, won the nomination easily, the Democrats came out of the convention quite weakened. Humphrey also lost the election to Richard Nixon.

The Democratic National Convention in 1972 was not very successful either. The nomination of George McGovern

was not controversial in itself, but the organization of the convention was chaotic, to say the least. In fact, McGovern ended up giving what might be the worst acceptance speech in history. It was not *what* he said that was the problem, but *when* he said it. You would think that the Democrats had developed some understanding of radio and television by 1972. After the election of vice-presidential candidate got out of hand, however, McGovern had to deliver his acceptance speech at 3 a.m., local time. Obviously, prime time television viewers were sound asleep by then.

The 2012 conventions

The choice of Charlotte, North Carolina as the location for the Democratic National Convention this year has probably been influenced by many factors, and one such factor is definitely the prospect of winning as many electoral votes as possible in the general election. In 2008 Barack Obama won North Carolina's 15 electoral votes by a very narrow margin (about 14,000 votes), which makes North Carolina an undecided or "barely Democratic" swing state in 2012. Consequently, it does not hurt to let the state host the Democratic party for a few days. Moreover, the chair of the convention will be Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, a successful Latino politician. Again, this is no coincidence. President Obama needs to maintain his popularity among Hispanic voters in order to ensure reelection.

On the first two days of the convention, the location will be the Time Warner Cable Arena, which seats around 20,000 people. On September 6, however, Barack Obama will deliver his acceptance speech at Bank of America Stadium, which seats close to 75,000 people. Actually, it may be seen as a bit ironic that Barack Obama will be using the podium of a stadium named Bank of America, as banks have become quite controversial during the present financial crisis. Obama has definitely been critical of American banks, but generally his administration has been criticized for being too inclined to accommodate them. For that reason the Republicans are sure to make a point out of the name of the venue, but the



National Guardsmen wearing gas masks and armed with rifles and automatic pistols drag off a felled protester at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, 1968. (©NTB scanpix)

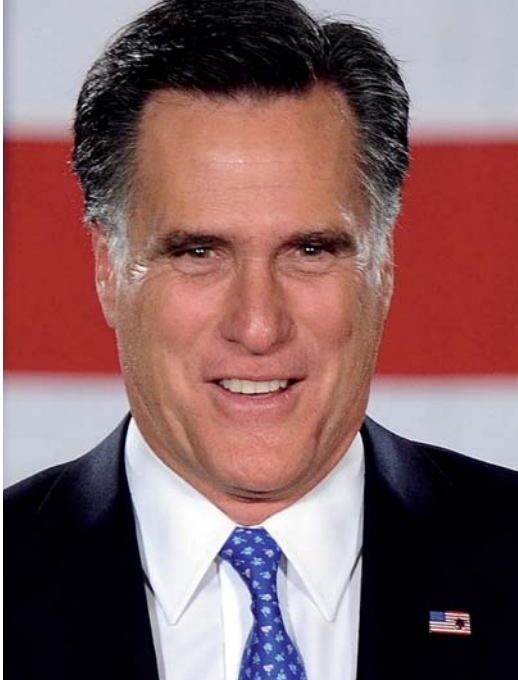
stadium was probably chosen because it is a huge football stadium, and there cannot be that many stadiums to choose from in Charlotte.

Barack Obama may be emulating John F. Kennedy, as he did in 2008, by moving the whole convention outside to a stadium on the day of the acceptance speech. In 1960 Kennedy delivered his acceptance speech to 80,000 people in Los Angeles. In 2008 Obama did the same thing in Denver, Colorado, before 84,000 people at Invesco Field Stadium. You would think 20,000 spectators would create enough enthusiasm, but with a good speaker on the ticket there is of course no reason why the party should not fill a stadium, make the convention available to more people, and use it as a real campaign booster.

Traditionally, the incumbent party in the White House hosts its national convention after the other party. So the Republicans will go first, namely from August 27 to August 30. The Republican National Convention will be held at the Tampa Bay Times Forum, an arena in Tampa, Florida which seats around 20,000 people.

Florida is also a strategic choice for a national party convention. It is another swing state with 29 electoral votes that can easily go to any of the candidates in the general election. *The Tampa Bay Times*, Florida's largest newspaper, will endorse President Obama, but in August it is the Republican National Convention that will draw most of the attention. One challenge for the organizers of the convention, or rather the Tampa police, is that the convention is also expected to draw many Occupy movement protesters, who protest against social and economic inequality.

Inside the convention, however, there will be no protesting. This year it is only the Republicans that have been fighting each other during the primary season, and it is time for the party to show unity. The convention program will certainly include a number of endorsements of Mitt Romney by fellow Republicans, such as his wife, primary opponents, perhaps a former president



Presumptive Republican nominee Mitt Romney (L) and President Barack Obama
(©NTB scanpix)

and other major figures within the party. In between all this a famous singer or two will show up to entertain the delegates. The Republicans may choose country singers, whereas the Democrats are more likely to invite somebody like Stevie Wonder or Bruce Springsteen. It is also possible to create some extra excitement by announcing the choice of candidate for the vice-presidency, or presidential running mate, as close to the convention as possible. How Mitt Romney will go about this remains to be seen.

The general election

After the national party conventions are over, the nominated candidates for the presidency, President Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, will have another two strenuous months ahead of them. The candidates will probably be quite tough, but still fairly moderate in their attacks on each other. However, in general the campaign is bound to become dirty. The dirtiest campaigning will be paid for by the political action committees, the so-called Super PACs. One of President Barack Obama's challenges will be American Crossroads, the most powerful Republican Super PAC, which was created by George Bush's former chief strategist Karl Rove. The combination of a Super PAC, which can collect unlimited donations from corporations and individuals, and Karl Rove is powerful.

At any rate, predicting the outcome of the election on November 6 is a risky business. Statistically, an incumbent president who gets full support from fellow party members and is not challenged by other candidates in the primaries, often wins a second term. President Obama has a good starting point in that respect. On the other hand, one of the most reliable indicators of a president's chances of winning a second term is the amount of money Americans earn after taxes and inflation. This is called disposable personal income or take-home pay. In more popular terms, the basic question is: "Will Americans be better off in November than they were four years ago?" In this respect it looks good for Mitt Romney, as the answer at the moment seems to be "No". Take-home pay actually fell slightly earlier this year and the U.S. economy is still in limbo. Without downplaying other factors that can influence the outcome of the election, it is safe to conclude that the economy needs to pick up more before November in order for President Obama to feel sure of winning a second term.

References

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