

CONVENTIONS

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- only held in Pres election years – org'd by Party National Cttees in July/August
- 4 days for each – held in diff city each time (some competition to host as city can expect an econ/media boost)
- attended by delegates (2008: 4418 for Dems, 2380 for GOP) chosen in primaries/caucuses – they are then pledged to vote for a partic candidate (although if their cand has subsequently withdrawn, they are free agents, able to vote for who they like – e.g. Dem Conv 2008, John Edward's 25 delegates backed Obama after their man endorsed him.
- number of Democratic delegates includes some **super-delegates** (several hundred senior party figures like Senators, Governors, former Presidents, Nat Cttee members, etc.) or Republican **unpledged** delegates (150 RNC members) who are not pledged to vote for a partic candidate – (but most declare who they will support in advance.

- **Official purpose** = choose Pres candidate & write platform (manifesto)

- once convs genuinely chose party nominee – needs maj of delegates support to win. If no cand with maj on first vote, previously pledged delegates can switch their support in subsequent ballots. A series of ballots is held until a candidate wins a maj (multiple ballots needed on 7 occasions to decide major party nominee 1900-1952)
- but since late 1960s candidate chosen thro primaries & known well before Conv (e.g. McCain Republ candidate by March 2008 - although Obama only won Dem nomination in June & for a while it looked possible that the votes of super-delegates at the Conv could be crucial)
- so official **Roll-call vote** of delegates is only a formality (it was abandoned at 2008 Dem Conv when Clinton called instead for a stage-managed vote by acclamation to symbolise party unity behind Obama)
- In theory Conv also chooses VP cand, but this hasn't happened since 1956. Now Pres nominee chooses their running-mate, who is confirmed by acclamation at Conv. Now (since 1984 for Dems, 1996 for GOP) Pres cand announces their choice a few days before the Conv.
- **Party Platform** of policy cttments presented by party Nat Cttee at Conv, following long process of dev (now involves online consultation/interaction), so Conv no longer has real role in making policy (although some formal debates will happen, the Nat Cttee wants to avoid appearance of disunity).

- **Informal purposes** – now more imp - debatable signif within overall election campaign

- **Promoting party unity** – chance to reunite after divisive primary battles – esp imp. for Dems in 2008 (cf. Clinton interruption of roll-call vote, both Bill & Hillary made speeches backing Obama). Doesn't always work – 1980 Dem Conv & 1992 GOP Conv both bitter events & their incumbent Pres went on to lose in each case. Some bitterness over treatment of Ron Paul delegates at GOP Convention in 2012.
- **Enthuse activists** – party faithful relied on for hard work of general elect campaign (meetings, calls, leafleting, etc.) so have to be fired up with speeches, celebrity guests, rock/country music, etc. – Ted Kennedy's last speech to Dems at 2008 Conv emotional & effective; Clint Eastwood's "empty chair" speech for GOP 2012 less so.

- **Enthuse ordinary voters** – most citizens don't take much notice of primary season (was 2008 an exception?), & only switch on to the Pres race at the Convs. Convs a huge media opp for the parties, so they are stage-managed for television. Programme builds over 4 days:

- each evening may have a theme, e.g. 2008 Dems Day 3 – “Securing America's future” – major speeches will be scheduled for TV prime-time
- Day 1 / 2– formal nomination of cand – Obama made this key speech for Kerry in 2004 & burst on to national stage. Candidate's wives also often speak – both Michelle Obama and Ann Romney made well-received speeches in 2012.
- Day 3 – roll-call vote to confirm nominee (dull & long, so kept off prime-time). Running mate usually makes their acceptance speech in evening.
- Day 4 – Conv ends with Pres cand's big **acceptance speech** – critical chance to make a big impression on voters, esp if cand not well known already (e.g. Obama)
- parties can expect a “bounce” in the polls immediately after Conv. (averages 4% for incumbent party, 6-7% for challenging party) – 2008 not v typical here. BUT – “bounce” often drops back in weeks after Conv, so not a great predictor of election result – although in 2012 GOP got very little bounce, while Obama gained 4% and held it until the first debate.

Importance of Modern Conventions – polls suggest voters not much bothered, nor are pol commentators enthusiastic:

- **Criticisms:** - Modern Convs have little imp, are too stage-managed & therefore dull.
 - TV coverage declining (3 trad networks coverage of GOP Conv 46 hrs in 1968 -> c12 hrs in 2008 & 2012)
- **In Defence of Convs** – provide focus for electorate at start of gen elect campaign: first impressions of candidates often count for a lot.
 - internal party functions signif – uniting & enthusing activists
 - provide arena to identify rising stars (1984 Dem Conv Bill Clinton; 2004 Dem Conv Obama)
 - Several hours of prime-time TV exposure hugely valuable to parties
 - research suggests coverage of conventions is especially effective in swinging wavering partisans behind their party's nominee.