



Staging History

During the U.S. Democratic and Republican national conventions this summer, thousands of delegates will be waving American flags and signs bearing the name of their party's candidate for president. It will be a stirring sight.

But while the excitement on the convention floor is genuine, virtually every moment of the event is scripted and choreographed to have maximum impact on television, computer and smartphone screens.

"You put things in people's hands that they can wave and participate with," said William L. Bird, a curator of political history at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. "The people who manage the stagecraft of the convention — by that I mean what happens on the floor — pay very close attention to this."



Top: Ohio delegates Peggy Tanksley(l) and Cathryn Fellingner(r) at the 2008 Democratic National Convention in Denver. Above: Delegates attend the 1920 Republican National Convention in Chicago.

A national political convention has to accomplish certain things, writes David Mark of *Politico*, a Washington-based news outlet: adopting a party platform (a set of principles) and formally nominating candidates for president and vice president. "The rest of the usual convention stagecraft — acceptance speeches, keynote addresses, and even the traditional roll call vote — are optional bits of political theater."

2012 Conventions

The conventions are held a few months before the presidential election, which is scheduled for November 6 this year. Republicans will gather in Tampa, Florida, August 27 to 30, and Democrats will convene September 3 to 6 in Charlotte, North Carolina. More than 35,000 people - including party members, delegates, journalists, security forces and other service providers — are expected to descend on each of these cities.

As with many aspects of U.S. politics, national party conventions have evolved over time to serve the changing needs of the electorate. The U.S. Constitution does not reference political parties or a selection process for candidates to the nation's highest office, but mechanisms arose and adapted to fill that vacuum.

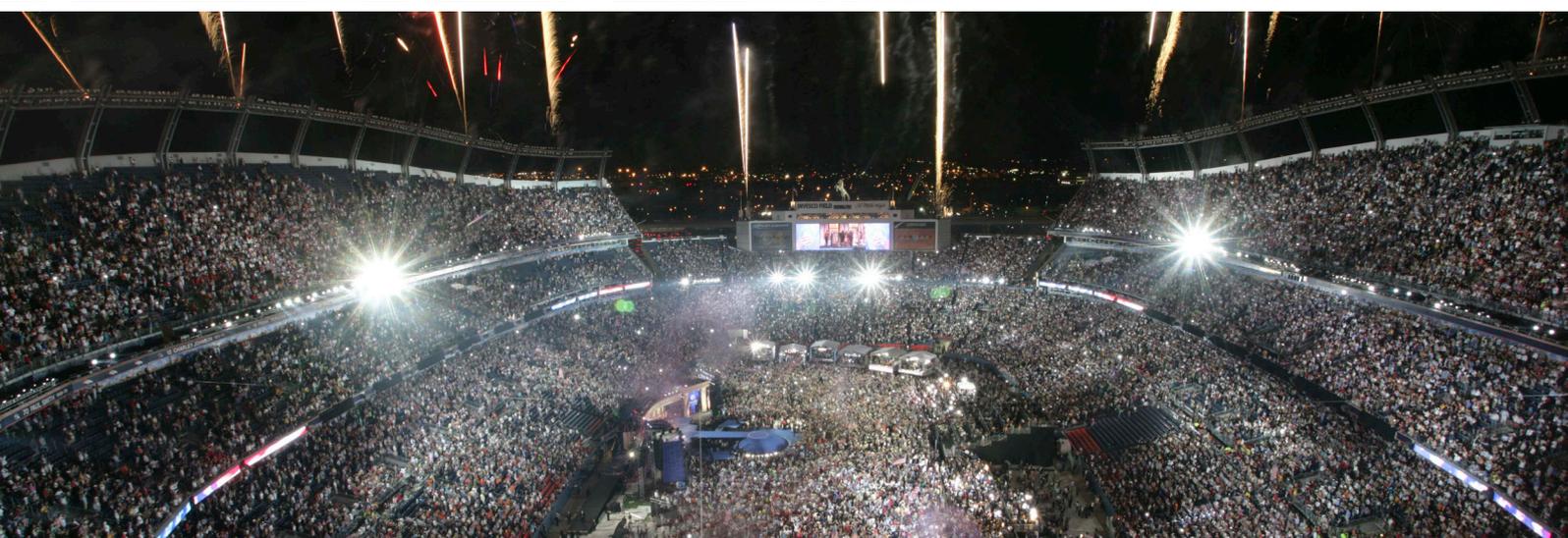
Beginning in 1796, members of the U.S. Congress who identified with one of the political parties of the time met informally to agree on their party's presidential and vice presidential nominees. This selection system, known as the "King Caucus," continued for almost 30 years but broke down in 1824 as the nation's westward expansion decentralized political power.

National nominating conventions gradually replaced King Caucus as the means for selecting party nominees. In 1831, a minor party called the Anti-Masons met in a Baltimore saloon to choose candidates and write a party platform. A year later, Democrats met in the same saloon to select their nominees.

Since then, the major parties and most minor parties have held national nominating conventions at which state delegates vote on the party's nominees to the offices of president and vice president and on the party's policy positions. For most of the 19th century, the presidential nominating conventions were controlled by party leaders who selected their state's convention delegates and steered the delegation's votes.



Left: Delegates wave signs during the 2008 Republican National Convention in St. Paul, Minnesota. Above: Rene Christian from Miami dances during the 2008 Democratic National Convention. Below: Fireworks explode at the end of the 2008 Democrats' convention.



Primary Elections

Populist demands for reform in the early years of the 20th century led to primary elections that allowed voters to select convention delegates directly. By 1916, more than half the states were holding presidential primaries. After World War I, party leaders successfully pushed back, persuading many state legislatures to abolish primaries. By 1936, only a dozen states continued to hold presidential primaries. The pendulum swung back in the mid-20th century, when television allowed candidates to communicate more directly with voters and heightened voter interest in the nominating process.

With each succeeding decade, primaries expanded and the party's nominee became more likely to be determined well in advance of the national convention, based on the results of state primaries.

The actual size of any state's delegation to the national nominating convention is calculated by a formula established by each party that considers the state's population, its past support for the party's national candidates and the number of elected officials and party leaders currently serving in statewide and national office from that state. The Democratic Party's allocation formula results in national conventions that have about twice as many delegates as those of the Republican Party.

"In the past, the national convention served as a decision-making body, actually determining the party's nominee," said Eric Appleman, producer of the nonpartisan website Democracy in Action. "One could argue that modern-day conventions are little more than four-day advertisements for the political parties' tightly scripted made-for-TV spectacles."

Conventions remain important to the political parties, he said, because they energize party activists for the fall campaign, "and, if all goes well, the presidential ticket emerges with a "convention bounce" — a surge in public support.