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ELECTING THE PRESIDENT: PROCEEDINGS OF THE DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTIONS, 1832-1988



This collection includes the proceedings of the 1832-1988 Democratic National Conventions, providing gavel to gavel coverage, including speeches, debates, votes, and party platforms. Also included are lists of names of convention delegates and alternates. Records of the earliest proceedings are based in part on contemporary newspaper accounts.

Date Range: 1832-1988

Content: 16,757 images

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Detailed Description:

The first national convention of the Democratic Party began in Baltimore on May 21, 1832. In that year the 2/3 rule was created, requiring a 2/3 vote to nominate a candidate, in order to show the party's unanimous support of Martin Van Buren for vice president. Although this rule was waived in the 1836 and 1840 conventions, in 1844 it was revived by opponents of former President Van Buren, who had the support of a majority, but not a super-majority, of the delegates, in order to prevent him from receiving the nomination. The rule then remained in place for almost the next hundred years, and often led to Democratic National Conventions which dragged on endlessly, most famously at the 1860 convention, when the convention adjourned in Charleston without making a choice and reconvening in separate groups a short time later, and the 1924 convention, when "Wets" and "Drys" deadlocked between preferred candidates Alfred E. Smith and William G. McAdoo for 103 ballots before finally agreeing on John W. Davis as a compromise candidate. At the 1912 convention, Champ Clark was the first person to receive a majority of the votes who did not go on to achieve a two-thirds vote and the nomination. The 2/3 rule was finally abolished in 1936, when the unanimity in favor of the re-nomination of President Franklin D. Roosevelt allowed it finally to be put to rest. In the years that followed only one convention (the 1952 Convention) actually went beyond a single ballot, although this may be more attributable to changes in the nominating process itself than to the rules change.

During the time the rule was in force, it virtually assured that no candidate not supported by the South could be nominated. The elimination of the two-thirds rule made it possible for liberal Northern Democrats to gain greater influence in party affairs, leading to the disenchantment of Southern Democrats, and defection of many of the latter to the Republican Party, especially during the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s. Strom Thurmond was one such Democrat who joined the Republican Party.

William Jennings Bryan delivered his "Cross of Gold" speech at the 1896 convention. The most historically notable—and tumultuous—convention of recent memory was the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Illinois, which was fraught with highly emotional battles between conventioners and Vietnam War protesters and a notable outburst by Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley. Other confrontations between various groups, such as the Yippies and members of the Students for a Democratic Society, and the Chicago police in city parks, streets and hotels marred this convention. Following the 1968 convention, in which many reformers had been disappointed in the way that Vice President Hubert Humphrey, despite not having competed in a single primary, easily won the nomination over Senators Eugene McCarthy and George McGovern, a commission headed by Senator McGovern reformed the Democratic Party's nominating process to increase the power of primaries in choosing delegates in order to increase the democracy of the process. Not entirely coincidentally, McGovern himself won the nomination in 1972. The 1972 convention was significant in that the new rules put into place as a result of the McGovern commission also opened the door for quotas mandating that certain percentages of delegates be women or members of minority groups, and subjects that were previously deemed not fit for political debate, such as abortion and lesbian and gay rights, now occupied the forefront of political discussion. That convention itself was one of the most interesting in American history, with sessions beginning in the early evening and lasting until sunrise the next morning, and outside political activists gaining influence at the expense of elected officials and core Democratic constituencies such as organized labor, thus resulting in a convention far to the left of the rank-and-file of the Democratic Party.

The nature of Democratic (and Republican) conventions has changed considerably since 1972. Every four years, the nominees are essentially selected earlier and earlier in the year, so the conventions now officially ratify the nominees instead of choose them. The 1980 convention was the last convention for the Democrats that had even a sliver of doubt about who the nominee would be. The 1976 convention was the last where the vice-presidential nominee was announced during the convention, after the presidential nominee was chosen. After the conventions of 1968 and 1972, the parties realized it was in their interests to show a unified party to the nation during the convention, and to try to eliminate any dissent. And as the conventions became less interesting, and television ratings have generally declined, the networks have cut back their coverage significantly, which in turn has forced the parties to manage what is televised even more closely.