Conventional Wisdom & the 2008 Conventions
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It’s the dream of every political junkie in America and the nightmare of every presidential campaign: a contested convention that forces the nomination fight beyond the first ballot. But whether hoped for or dreaded, contested conventions are the rarest of phenomenon in modern politics. Almost three in four Americans were not yet born the last time either party had such a contest.

For Democrats, that was in 1952 when it took three ballots to nominate Governor Adlai Stevenson of Illinois for the first of what would be two unsuccessful campaigns for the presidency. The GOP’s last multi-ballot convention occurred four years earlier in 1948. New York Governor Thomas Dewey won that one in another three ballot contest before going on to lose to Harry Truman.

Since 1952, no convention has gone beyond the first ballot. In fact, only one convention has been seriously contested at all--the Republican Convention in 1976 when Gerald Ford barely beat Ronald Reagan on the first ballot.

But this particular chapter of American political history may be ripe for revision in 2008. Certainly, party nomination rules adopted since 1968 make contested conventions unlikely. But less than a month away from the 2008 primaries and caucuses, both major parties have multi-candidate struggles going on--and arguably either party, or even both parties, could open their respective conventions without a consensus nominee.

The GOP seems more likely to have a contested convention. New York’s Giuliani and Massachusetts’s Romney are the party’s national frontrunners, but neither controls enough early contests to ensure nomination. In fact, one can posit plausible scenarios under which any of three others--McCain, Huckabee, and Thompson--could still emerge as the nominee.

But Republicans are not unique in having a tight nomination contest. Democrats too are not guaranteed a quick resolution to their contest. Both gender and race are at play in that race, injecting unknowns that may stretch it out. Iowa is now so close that any of three candidates--Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama or John Edwards--could win there. If Clinton, once comfortably ahead there, does not win, the race goes on at least through February 5th.

What would be the consequences of contested conventions? How would the sanitized stage-managed convention model of the last 40 years or so fit into a new and likely raucous environment created by a convention battle?

Probably most significant would be the implications for the presidential nominating system. Since the 1960’s, conventions have had no meaningful role in nominating candidates. As historian James Paterson has put it, conventions have become “scripted, anachronistic rituals, not decision-making bodies.” In their place, party primaries and caucuses have become the de facto nomination mechanism; successful nominees have arrived at the convention with the delegate votes needed or comfortably close to that needed for a first ballot nomination.
But what if that doesn’t happen in 2008? What if no candidate wins a majority of the delegates before the party conventions convene in late August and early September?

The answer is both simple and profound. If no candidate arrives with a majority of delegates, the convention itself must determine the winner. But who exactly will do this? And how?

In the past, contested conventions have been "brokered," which is an elegant way of describing the hard-nosed horse trading carried on by leading party bosses seeking a nominee. The bosses tried to settle on a nominee before the convention. When this failed, they used multiple ballots to test respective candidate strength. Sometimes these contests went on for several days and dozens of ballots. The longest was the Democratic Convention in 1924 that went 102 ballots before nominating John W. Davis.

But a 2008 era brokered convention can’t follow this script because the parties leaders, i.e. bosses, that made it work are gone. In their place is an array of campaigns, candidates, consultants, and constituent groups that somehow will have to figure out how to broker a nomination in the modern era.

About the nearest example we have of how crazy it might get is the 1976 Republican Convention when Ronald Reagan tried to block Gerald Ford’s nomination by naming his vice president pick (Richard Schweiker) before the convention. Even more bizarre was the GOP convention four years later which briefly flirted with nominating a former president (Ford) for vice president.

But zany ideas and party leadership vacuums may be among the milder problems either party would face if the nomination was unresolved by the convention. More unsettling would be the conflict unleashed within the party and played out on national television.

It is no coincidence that brokered conventions ended after networks began to televise them. The 1952 convention is instructive. Actually settled on the first ballot when Dwight Eisenhower beat Robert Taft, the intra-party brawling that preceded the Eisenhower victory appalled thousands who watched it on TV. Since that time, both parties try mightily to orchestrate their convention as a political love feast--lest they antagonize viewers who will be voters in November.

The political parties’ aversion to contested conventions is not without reason. Party slugfests at the convention often augur defeat at the polls. Both the Democrats (1952) and the Republicans (1948) lost after their last multi-ballot conventions. Similarly the GOP lost presidential elections in 1912 and 1940 after bitter convention fights, while Democrats lost after multi-ballot conventions in 1920 and 1924. More recently, the 1968 Democratic debacle in Chicago, featuring riots outside the convention hall and near riots inside, showed just how difficult it is for a badly divided party to win.

How this will all play out will be clearer in the next 60 days. The institutional factors arrayed against a brokered convention are formidable. Moreover, both parties recognize the significant electoral costs associated with a convention impasse: they may be great drama but they are also bad politics.

Nevertheless, events may be in the political saddle in 2008. Neither candidate nor party may be able to stop the political forces bearing down on them. If so, we may see the first real convention in more than half a century.
If we do, it’s unlikely to be a particularly elevated or inspiring affair. But it is likely to be real, unvarnished, and true to life--politics in the raw rather than today’s politics on the half shell. Modern politics could use some of that old-fashioned authenticity. It might get it in 2008.

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