

U.S. Office of Public Policy

Special Washington Update

Top Ten Issues to Watch at the Party Conventions

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VP Picks. Over the past few weeks, considerable attention has been given to the potential running mates for Clinton and Trump. This is interesting speculation, but these selections likely will not affect who wins in November. Voters likely will view the VP candidates as little more than curiosities and instead focus on Clinton and Trump, who both have well-defined and strong personal brands. The VP picks can make a difference, however, if one of the choices (or both) is not deemed to be qualified to serve as president if a tragedy struck the sitting president. We believe that John McCain was hurt by his choice of Sarah Palin in 2008 for this reason. Although we are downplaying the VP picks, we expect Clinton to follow a familiar script and pick a candidate over the next ten days who she believes will help her turn out two important voting blocs in large numbers—minority voters and younger voters. It has been more difficult to project a Trump selection, but he certainly needs someone with political connections and experience with Republican lawmakers. Indiana Governor Mike Pence seems to be the favorite as Trump plans to make a decision any day now. *Take these selections with a grain of salt since they won't matter very much to the November outcome.*

Unity for Democrats? Both parties want to show voters the strength and unity of the support they have for their nominees and to end any “family fights” or distractions that take the media eye off of this unity theme. With

Sanders’ endorsement of Clinton this week, Democrats are closer to unification and will probably have a less-contentious convention as a result. Sanders’ supporters will still grumble about Clinton’s commitment to their causes, but we sense that most of them will ultimately get behind Clinton. This is a critical issue since younger voters fueled Obama’s victories in 2008 and 2012 as well as Sanders’ more recent rise, and Clinton will need the vast majority of them to win in November. Still, more work needs to be done to nail down the Sanders supporters who may be slow in making the switch from Bernie to Hillary. *We expect many of the convention’s speakers and activities to focus specifically on these voters.*

Unity for Republicans? At this time, Republicans are not as unified behind Trump as Democrats are behind Clinton. We see that as a problem that will likely dog the Trump campaign throughout the rest of the campaign. At least three of the primary candidates who Trump defeated still have not endorsed him, breaking a public promise they made earlier in the election to ultimately endorse the primary winner. Trump’s success in the primary has prompted much soul-searching by many longtime party activists, and his campaign will not emphasize some important Republican policy themes that were prominently featured in past campaigns, such as support for smaller government, an attack on deficit spending and promotion of free trade. Surprises can still occur, but we believe the lack of unity in the party is a serious and potentially fatal problem that must be fixed immediately. A lack of unity puts even more pressure on Trump to find voters outside of the party, such as union voters in the Midwest who seem to like his style and views on trade. *Trump can still win without solid party unity, but his path to victory would be more narrow and difficult.*

Party Platforms. One awkward moment at the 2012 Democratic National Convention occurred when Jewish voters were offended that the party platform didn’t include a reference to Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Democrats changed the platform at the last minute to reflect this change, but the snafu caused some Jewish

voters to question Democrats' support of Israel. The party platform is central to any convention, and episodes like this have to be minimized by both parties. In the next few weeks, each party will scour the other's platform and make hay out of certain issues, primarily issues viewed as outside of mainstream thought. This year, we will be particularly interested to see how pro-trade Republicans deal with Trump's stance on trade and how far Democrats will have to go to appease Sanders and his followers in their opposition to the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement. Both Sanders and Clinton oppose the agreement, but President Obama (the functioning head of the Democratic Party) has championed it. *Both platforms are likely to be pushed to the extremes in some areas to placate base voters, which make them more vulnerable to offending more independent-minded voters who are likely to be more important this year than in the last few elections.*

Tuned in. Trump is no rookie to television, and Hillary has already spoken at her fair share of conventions. Both conventions will rely on media experts to make their events attractive to viewers and to TV stations hungry for ratings. So, will frustrated voters watch or turn away? We think they will watch. Data shows that most of those tuning in do so to root for their own team, but in an already unpredictable election, we believe we will see voters crossing party lines to watch the convention of the other party as well. Curiosity over the candidates and a potential openness to voting for the other side will push a high number of people to tune into both conventions. We have not seen any historical correlation between high television viewership at conventions and candidates winning in November, but both parties view conventions as significant opportunities to showcase their nominee and his or her ideas in as positive a way as possible as the campaigns head into the home stretch. *The conventions will be the best TV opportunities for both candidates until their first debate on September 26.*

Convention Bounces? It is common for most party conventions to result in a surge of support for that party's candidate in their aftermath. Most convention bounces in the modern era have been worth five or six points on average in the polls, but some have been more significant. Bill Clinton reportedly gained 30 points in the polls after the 1992 Democratic Convention. Al Gore erased a 16-point lead held by George W. Bush after the Democratic Convention in 2000. John McCain reversed a lead established by Barack Obama after the Democratic Convention in 2008 and held a lead for a short time after the Republican Convention. Candidates who do not get a bounce, such as John Kerry in 2004 and Mitt Romney in 2012, generally face an uphill climb in November. More important than the size of the bounce is its longevity. Most bounces last for a short time and then stabilize or fade depending on other developments in the campaign. *We expect both candidates to get a healthy bounce from their conventions this year, and their difficult challenges will be to keep their momentum going after the bright lights and national coverage from their conventions subside.*

Targeted Base Voters. In the modern era, the template for a successful presidential candidate generally has been to win the general election by creating enthusiasm among base voters in a primary election and then pivoting to the philosophical middle to woo more independent-minded voters in November. In 2004, George W. Bush realized he could win by not necessarily targeting more independent voters but by increasing the turnout of more Republican-leaning voters who had not voted in previous elections. His gambit worked, and he was re-elected in 2004. Barack Obama used the same strategy in 2008 and 2012 by focusing on policy issues that maximized voting turnout among Democratic voters, particularly younger and minority voters. In a 2016 election where many voters are dissatisfied with their party's nominee, we could see a departure from this "pad the base" strategy and a return to a focus of crossover voters. With party unity a problem for him, Trump will have no choice but to rely on Democrats and Independents. The silver lining for Trump is that he would have a broader mandate that would in part represent a repudiation of the party system if he is successful in cobbling together a broad coalition that includes a significant number of non-Republican votes. *Clinton will surely woo those Republicans unable to support Trump but will spend more time focusing on her base in the way Obama did—by maximizing turnout among younger and minority voters who can propel her in the key swing states of Florida, Virginia, North Carolina, Colorado and Nevada.*

Breakout Star? At the 2004 Democratic Convention, a young and largely unknown Illinois State Senator named Barack Obama gave a prime time speech. Four short years later he was elected President of the United States. Conventions have the potential to catapult an unknown into the spotlight. Both parties and media try to find an up-and-comer and boost his or her stock at the convention. Obviously, not all end up being elected president or in any higher office, and some fade away from the spotlight quickly. The White House has banned cabinet secretaries from speaking at the convention, which means at least two potential up-and-comers, Labor Secretary Tom Perez and HUD Secretary Julian Castro, will miss this opportunity unless they are chosen as Clinton's running mate. *We are watching to see if any of the following people might be the up-and-comers you read about post-conventions: Senator Joni Ernst (R-IA), Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR), Senator Cory Gardner (R-CO), Senator Cory Booker (D-NJ), Congresswoman Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) and California Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom.*

Protests and Preparation. Convention attendees and the media, as well as each host city's police force, are taking the threat of planned protests and possible violence very seriously. In Philadelphia last weekend, clergy and civil rights activists teamed up to use role-playing exercises to educate protesters about their rights and on what to expect if they are arrested. We've previously reported on protesters affiliated with Bernie Sanders having permits for protests outside the convention hall in Philadelphia, and we expect large protests from familiar civil rights groups in the wake

of recent events. Professional protesters also will be at both conventions. While organized protests require permits, there inevitably will be some groups that organize without permission and therefore pose further security risks. Groups that have had permits approved in Cleveland include Stand Together Against Trump, Code Pink Women for Peace and West Borough Baptist Church. To deal with the upcoming convention in Cleveland, the city plans to triple the size of its police force on duty and is clearing up jail space to process up to 1,000 people per day as well as increasing the city's liability coverage from \$10 million to \$50 million to protect against damage from protestors. Security will be heavy and well-planned, but as we have seen recently, violence and mayhem can be triggered on a moment's notice by one determined individual. *Neither party wants to be remembered for having a chaotic convention, but that is largely out of their control.*

Wild Cards. What are those things that could happen to upend the grandiose plans from both parties and change the media story overnight? The conventions are largely scripted, so any wild card would need to be some exogenous shock. None of these possibilities are good, but foremost is a terrorist attack somewhere, particularly on U.S. soil. A natural disaster would be a big problem, as a hurricane almost postponed the Republican Convention in 2012. Fortunately, Cleveland and Philadelphia are not known to be natural disaster hot spots. A wild card could also be a self-induced wound, such as Clint Eastwood's odd participation in the 2012 Republican Convention, and Ted Kennedy's overshadowing of President Jimmy Carter at the 1980 Democratic Convention. Is there an Eastwood or Kennedy lurking? Ted Cruz will be speaking at the Republican Convention, and who knows what he will say. He hasn't endorsed Trump, and he clearly wants to lay a foundation for a run in 2020 if Trump fails this year. *Neither are good omens for Trump.*

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