



## Heberlig, Eric S., Suzanne M. Leland, and David Swindell. *American Cities and the Politics of Party Conventions*

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## BOOK REVIEW

Heberlig, Eric S., Suzanne M. Leland, and David Swindell. *American Cities and the Politics of Party Conventions*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2017. 254 pages. \$90 (hardcover); \$22.95 (softcover).

Presidential nominating conventions are considered by many to be vestiges of politics past. Yet, even though the quadrennial national party conventions have changed dramatically over the past few decades in ways that have caused many analysts to question their utility and significance, they remain enduring features of presidential campaigns. Scholars continue to find evidence that campaigns “matter” in a variety of ways, such as by stimulating interest in presidential campaigns, attracting media attention, informing voters, and influencing voting decisions (Erikson and Wlezien 2012; Panagopoulos 2007, 2008; Panagopoulos and Endres 2016; Weinschenk and Panagopoulos 2016). However, less is known about convention effects on host cities and national parties’ considerations when selecting convention sites. This book fills that void by providing a fresh, empirically-grounded, and interdisciplinary assessment of the relationship between national party conventions and American cities. The authors, a capable partnership of a political parties and elections expert (Heberlig), a public administration scholar (Leland), and an urban policy and economic development expert (Swindell), assemble a volume that sheds light on a wide variety of topics, ranging from how national parties select host locations and finance conventions to the social, political, and economic effects that conventions have on host cities and their residents. The evidence, consisting of a mixture of rich qualitative information (interviews and case studies) coupled with solid quantitative data, is convincing and systematic. Readers will learn a great deal about convention planning and execution along with what conventions can (and cannot) deliver to host cities. Overall, the book firmly establishes that, “[t]he critical player in the new politics of conventions is the city” (169).

The book is thoughtfully and methodically organized. The authors begin with an assessment of the goals that parties and cities seek to achieve by hosting party conventions—a unique example of mega-events. They then investigate the factors associated with site selection by showing that these considerations reflect a complex mix of political, financial, and infrastructure (capacity) variables. The authors find, for instance, that capacity variables are far more influential than political considerations in whether cities submit bids to host conventions. When selecting sites, parties need to ensure that cities “have the capacity, the resources, and the willingness to implement conventions competently” (54). Infrastructure, financial capacity, and unity (public support for hosting conventions) are all important criteria.

Conventions do not come cheap. The authors show that presidential nomination convention spending more than quadrupled between 1980 and 2004, and that the total major-party expenditures on conventions have exceeded \$150 million in each election cycle between 2000 and 2012. The authors analyze sources of convention funding, including funds from public sources (post-9/11 federal security grants and state/local sources) and private (host committee) fundraising, and they show that federal and private sources each account for about half of the overall funds in recent cycles. The authors also discuss the impact of recent reforms, including the fact that Congress ended public funding for conventions from the presidential public funding account in 2014.

Chapter 4 discusses the complexities of hosting national conventions and the challenges that host cities encounter when normal routines are disrupted, and intense intergovernmental and inter-organizational coordination and planning are required. Host cities also must grapple with the prospects of protests and unforeseen circumstances, like weather and other emergencies. Effective execution of national conventions requires skillful balancing of city planning, coordination, and implementation.

The following two chapters consider the political and economic benefits of political conventions for host cities. Some of this material reinforces what other studies have shown, including the authors' evidence that informational effects are consistent with the extant scholarship (Panagopoulos 2007; Weinschenk and Panagopoulos 2016). However, there are also several novel insights and evidence that dispels conventional wisdom. For example, hosting conventions appears to engage voters, stimulating short but also longer-term voting in host cities. Conventions also can elevate convention media consumption as well as volunteerism and persuasion efforts and they can affect local government evaluations. There are perceptions that successfully executed conventions boost ratings of city government competence and responsiveness. Even out-partisans, it seems, are more willing to rate local government highly if they view a successful convention as an example of effective performance (125). Conventions also spur mayoral ambition to seek higher office, even if their prospects for victory in these contests are not necessarily enhanced.

Do conventions affect economic development? Here the authors undertake a range of nuanced empirical analyses to investigate the economic impact of hosting national conventions. On this score, there is scant evidence that hosting a presidential convention significantly influences a city's key economic and crime statistics (146). So, if host cities' economies do not benefit, what incentive do cities have to incur the considerable costs of hosting conventions? There are several. Media exposure and online searches for cities spike during conventions, and convention spending also exerts short-term benefits, especially for particular sectors of the local economy (149). Longer-term benefits are few, in part because larger contracts are awarded to out-of-town vendors. Given that conventions frequently inconvenience local residents with additional traffic and security issues, without many tangible benefits, local officials often build public support for hosting these events by touting post-convention "legacies" (i.e., infrastructure, facilities, road resurfacing, hotel renovations, technology and security upgrades, and beautification projects) to demonstrate broader benefits for the community.

Using contingent valuation methodology, the authors also demonstrate that citizens extract intangible or psychological benefits from mega-events like conventions. Interestingly, the analyses reveal that liberals and those who give the local government high marks for performance are more willing to invest in mega-events, but both self-identified Democrats and Republicans are less willing to do so compared to independents. The authors also find that successfully hosting conventions helps to boost local government administrative legitimacy, demonstrates technical competence (in a traditional public management sense), and "fosters good relationships with citizens as 'customers' under the New Public Management framework" (171).

This volume brings together a wide array of insights regarding hosting mega-events, like national presidential conventions, that are relevant to public administration and urban scholars, as well as practitioners including city leaders, political parties, and candidates. It adds meaningfully to the scholarly literature on convention effects by adopting an interdisciplinary perspective that extends beyond traditional analyses of this sort by considering how stakeholders select host sites and organize conventions, along

with how these events affect host cities and their citizens. For readers seeking a refreshing take on convention effects, this book is a must-read.

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