

Costas Panagopoulos\* and Kyle Endres

# The Enduring Relevance of National Presidential Nominating Conventions

DOI 10.1515/for-2015-0039

**Abstract:** Some contend the relevance of presidential nominating conventions has faded in recent decades as fewer voters watch and reach voting decisions during the conventions. We evaluate these trends empirically and consider the historical evolution of conventions to argue that, while they do not garner the attention they once did, conventions can still have a consequential effect on the outcomes of presidential elections, especially in competitive cycles.

## Introduction

Presidential nominating conventions have been a staple of American politics for almost 200 years. The Democratic and Republican Party faithful convene every 4 years at their respective conventions to formally nominate the candidate who will represent their party in the upcoming general election. Gone are the days of contentious debate, deliberation, and deal making to determine which candidate will emerge from the convention as the party's standard-bearer. The reforms that originated in the 1960s and 1970s have clarified the process by which delegates are pledged to the candidates through the primary and caucus systems and have eliminated the proverbial smoke-filled rooms of conventions past. The last time more than one ballot was necessary to decide the nominee was 1952,<sup>1</sup> and the last time a convention began without knowing definitively who would receive the party's nomination was the 1976 Republican National convention.<sup>2</sup> This is evidence that conventions have changed but not to suggest that there have not been close contests. In fact, the 2008 Democratic primary battle between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton was so close that many within the Democratic Party feared that the unpledged superdelegates would overrule the will of the primary voters and flip the count from Obama

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas M. Holbrook, *Do Campaigns Matter?* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Jason Bello and Robert Y. Shapiro, "On To the Convention!," *Political Science Quarterly* 123, (2008), 1–9.

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\*Corresponding author: Costas Panagopoulos, Department of Political Science, Fordham University, 441 E. Fordham Rd. Bronx, NY 10458, E-mail: [costas@post.harvard.edu](mailto:costas@post.harvard.edu)

Kyle Endres: Department of Government, The University of Texas at Austin

to Clinton's favor.<sup>3</sup> On the Republican side, rule changes prior to the 2012 convention extended the primary season as Mitt Romney fought and ultimately won the nomination against two, more conservative challengers, former Pennsylvania US Senator Rick Santorum and former Speaker of the US House Newt Gingrich. Officials from each campaign confirmed that there were talks between the two conservative challengers and their staffs about one of them exiting the race to give the other a shot at the nomination,<sup>4</sup> and even discussions about forming a "unity ticket" to defeat Romney so that a conservative (or someone whom they considered a conservative) would represent the party in the general election.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, both Gingrich and Santorum dropped out of the race, and Romney amassed enough delegates to secure the nomination in late May, almost 3 months prior to the Party's convention.

In contemporary election cycles, it is usually the case that each party's nominee is known well before the conventions. The nominee and his campaign become intimately involved in the planning and preparations. In fact, modern conventions are largely scripted with a heavy emphasis on production value and a focus towards how undecided voters and wavering partisans who may be tuning in from home perceive the proceeding. Though, even the most carefully planned event can have moments and speeches that become distractions. For example, in the most recent set of conventions (2012), each party had at least one aspect of their convention deviate from the expectations of the organizers. On the Republican side, Romney's campaign staff was surprised when actor, Clint Eastwood, abandoned the well-received remarks he had previously delivered at two Romney fundraisers to engage in an extended conversation with an empty chair, in which President Obama was presumed to be sitting, during primetime coverage and immediately prior to Mitt Romney's acceptance speech.<sup>6</sup> On the Democratic side, language referencing God and recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel was removed from and later reinserted into the party's platform via a controversial voice vote of the delegates following pressure and criticism from the party's leadership.<sup>7</sup> The fact is the conventions have changed quite dramatically over the last half-century partly in response to institutional changes but also in response to changes in the mass media. The parties have changed the conventions to suit the

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<sup>3</sup> Democratic National Committee, *Report of the Democratic Change Commission*, (2009).

<sup>4</sup> The Institute of Politics, John F. Kennedy School of Government, *Campaign for President: The Managers Look at 2012* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield 2013), 85.

<sup>5</sup> Joshua Green, "The Secret Gingrich-Santorum 'Unity Ticket' That Nearly Toppled Romney," *Business Week*, March 22, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> The Institute of Politics, John F. Kennedy School of Government, *Campaign for President: The Managers Look at 2012*.

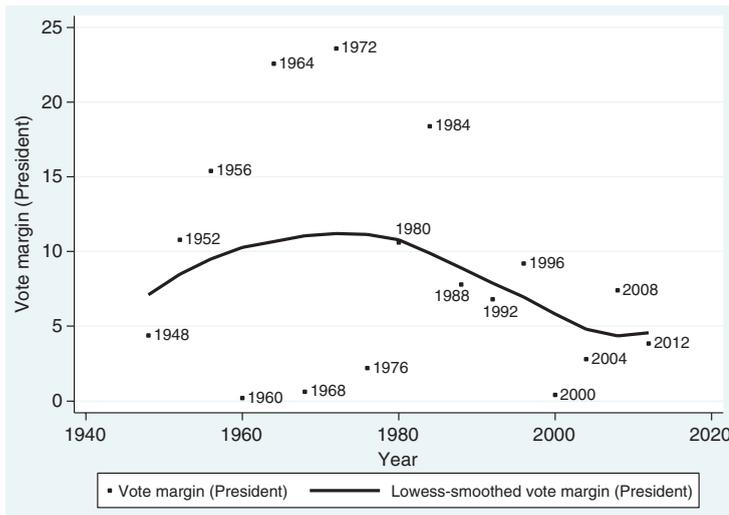
<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

expectations of the public and the media. Some argue that modern-day conventions are simply coronation ceremonies that no longer serve a useful purpose.<sup>8</sup>

## Do Conventions Still Matter?

The perspective that contemporary nominating conventions are largely inconsequential is worthy of scholarly consideration. Several developments over the past few decades that we summarize below can easily be interpreted to support this view. Over time, conventions have attracted less and less media coverage and dwindling audiences (Panagopoulos 2007); fewer voters make up their minds about which candidate to support during conventions, and changes in voter preferences have also become more modest in recent cycles. Notwithstanding these developments, we argue national presidential nominating conventions remain relevant in contemporary elections.

The disparate factors that lead some to conclude conventions do not matter must be considered within the broader context of increasingly competitive presidential election cycles. Figure 1 presents the eventual vote margins between the



**Figure 1:** Two-Party Vote Margins (Presidential Elections 1948–2012).  
Compiled by Authors.

<sup>8</sup> For example, see: Sandy L. Maisel, Justin Rouse, and Russell Wilson, “Unconventional Wisdom: The Future of Presidential Nominating Conventions,” *The New England Journal of Political Science* V, (2011), 229–64.

major-party presidential contenders in general elections over the postwar period. As the evidence clearly demonstrates, presidential elections over this period have become increasingly competitive over the past three decades, ultimately decided by smaller and smaller margins. In fact, all four of the most recent presidential elections have been decided by margins smaller than ten percentage points. The margins in three of the four cycles (2000, 2004, and 2012) have been less than five percentage points. In such scenarios, campaign events – like nominating conventions – have the capacity to exert meaningful effects on campaign dynamics and election outcomes, even if their overall popularity and potency has dwindled. So long as presidential elections are as competitive as they have been in recent cycles, decided by only small slices of the electorate, campaign events like conventions will remain relevant.

In this article, we elaborate this argument by reviewing the empirical evidence that undergirds it. As a baseline, we begin with a brief overview of the historical evolution of presidential nominating conventions and the institutional changes the parties adopted that have transformed conventions over the years.

## Historical Evolution and Institutional Change

The nominating conventions have a long history in the US. The Anti-Masonic Party held the earliest known presidential nominating convention in September 1831. Every four years since, the major parties have met to nominate their candidate for president. The conventions marked the formalization of political parties in the US. They were (and still are) an opportunity for partisans from across the country to coalesce in support of their candidate and their party's goal of electing the next president. For at least the first century, conventions were characterized by energetic debates over both the nominees and policy. It was not unusual for the conventions to require multiple ballots to reach a consensus on a candidate for November. Between 1876 and 1952, 26 conventions required more than one ballot, ten Republican and 16 Democratic.<sup>9</sup> The record belongs to the 1924 Democratic National Convention, which took 103 ballots over nine days for Wall Street lawyer John W. Davis to secure his party's nomination.

The classic image of party elites in smoke-filled rooms deciding the party's nominee faded away partly as a result of the media and new technologies such as radio and later television expanding the quadrennial meetings beyond the delegates in attendance. A series of institutional reforms designed to make the

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<sup>9</sup> Holbrook, *Do Campaigns Matter?*

nomination process more democratic and transparent adopted in the 1960s also wrestled control away from party leaders. On the Democratic side, the McGovern-Fraser Commission democratized the delegate selection system by expanding the avenues for citizen participation and limiting the influence of party leaders. These changes have had considerable effects for later conventions.<sup>10</sup> The elimination of restrictive fees and petition requirements for delegate candidates originated with the McGovern-Fraser recommendations, as did restrictions on voter registration, on the unit rule, and on proxy voting. Since 1976, the Democratic National Committee has released formal guidelines known as the “Delegate Selection Rules” to aid states and territories in their selection of delegates to the national convention.<sup>11</sup>

The Republican Party also made some reforms to their national conventions during the 1970s, but these reforms were not as extensive as those implemented by the Democratic Party. The Republican Party’s charter reserves the right to change the rules for the national convention which means the delegate selection rules are generally set four years prior at the previous convention.<sup>12</sup> Though, the 2008 Convention did establish a “Temporary Delegate Selection Committee” to review the rules and timing of the 2012 caucuses and primaries. One of the major changes originating from the Temporary Committee was the proportional allocation of all delegates in contests held prior to April. Many Republican campaign officials believe these change are positive for the primary voters and democracy more broadly, but are divided on how beneficial they are for the party. For example, Romney’s campaign manager, Matt Rhoades, believes the changes hurt the nominee since Romney faced such a well-financed general election opponent after being forced to spend a considerable sum of money to secure his party’s nomination in the extended process created by the proportional allocation of delegates. While John Brabender, a senior advisor to Romney’s primary challenger Rick Santorum, believes the changes were positive and allowed Santorum to prolong the process and have a reasonable shot at the Republican nomination.<sup>13</sup> Whether the changes are positive or negative is debatable, but they are impactful, as all potential candidates must adjust to the new, elongated schedule. In a maneuver that is arguably reminiscent of the smoke-filled rooms that so many in politics are nostalgic for, Romney allies privately lobbied the “Temporary

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**10** Charles C. Euchner and John Anthony Maltese, *Selecting the President: From 1789 to 1996* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1997).

**11** Democratic National Committee, *Report of the Democratic Change Commission*, 3.

**12** Democratic National Committee, *Report of the Democratic Change Commission*, 12.

**13** The Institute of Politics, John F. Kennedy School of Government, *Campaign for President: The Managers Look at 2012*, 50–2.

Delegate Selection Committee” to produce rules that would favor Romney in his second attempt to secure the Republican nomination.<sup>14</sup> For the 2016 Convention, the rule on proportional allocation is relaxed somewhat likely in response to the drawbacks that Romney and his delegates perceived from the extended primary calendar. All primaries and caucuses held before March 15th, instead of March 31st, must allocate the delegates proportionally with each state having the purview to decide the minimum percentage of the vote (up to 20%) that a candidate must receive to collect his or her proportion of delegates.<sup>15</sup>

The number of delegates attending the conventions, today, has increased greatly compared to the 1950s.<sup>16</sup> At the 1952 Democratic National Convention, 1642 delegates were seated. This number increased to 2477 in 1956 and increased again in 1980 up to 3331 and up once again to 4290 in 1996. This increase reflected both more pledged and unpledged delegates, with approximately 18% of the 1996 convention delegates unpledged.<sup>17</sup> At the 2008 convention, roughly 19% of the delegates were unpledged. Following the realization that these unpledged super-delegates could potentially sway the outcome of the voters whom participated in the Democratic primaries and caucuses; the Democratic National Convention established the Democratic Change Commission and called for a “significant reduction” in unpledged delegates.<sup>18</sup> The number of delegates whom will attend the 2016 Democratic National Convention is dependent upon the complex formulas used by the party to allocate and apportion delegates. The number of Democratic delegates begins with 3200 base delegates, a decrease from 2012 but higher than the 3000 base delegates used prior to 2012.<sup>19</sup> These 3200 base delegates will be apportioned to the states and the District of Columbia based on the state’s Democratic vote in the three most recent presidential elections and by population as determined by Electoral College votes. In addition, each state has the opportunity to accrue bonus delegates by bucking the trend of frontloading and scheduling their primary or caucus later (+10% for April, +20% for May–June 14) plus each state can receive an additional 15% for scheduling their primary or caucus as part of a regional cluster with surrounding states.<sup>20</sup> The added incentives

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**14** The Institute of Politics, John F. Kennedy School of Government, *Campaign for President: The Managers Look at 2012*.

**15** Republican National Committee, *The Rules of The Republican Party*, (2013), 19–26.

**16** Euchner and Maltese, *Selecting the President*.

**17** Democratic National Committee, *Report of the Democratic Change Commission*.

**18** Democratic National Committee, *Report of the Democratic Change Commission*, 18.

**19** Democratic National Committee Rules and Bylaws Committee, Delegate Selection Materials for the 2016 Democratic National Convention, 2014.

**20** Democratic National Committee, *Delegate Selection Materials for the 2016 National Convention*, 2014.

concerning the scheduling of each state's primary or caucus reflects how controversial the ordering can often become, with many states seemingly envious at Iowa and New Hampshire's status as the first caucus and first primary, respectively. In the 2008 election, the Florida State legislature scheduled its primary for January 29th. In response to this frontloading, the DNC decided not to seat any of Florida's delegates and had each candidate pledge not to campaign in the state. Michigan delegates encountered the same scenario when their state legislature moved their primary all the way up to January 15, 2008. Some within the Clinton camp believed that had Florida not been punished for these actions, a Clinton win in the state would have allowed her to reign in the momentum that Obama gained from his convincing win in the South Carolina primary days earlier and would have propelled her to the Democratic nomination.<sup>21</sup>

Compared to the Democratic National Convention, fewer delegates attend the Republican National Convention. Though, the numbers have also increased over the years, albeit more slowly. For example, 1348 delegates attended the 1972 convention. By 1988, 2277 delegates were in attendance. And in 2012, there were 2286 delegates. The Republicans, similarly, use a complex allocation procedure. For 2016, the procedure includes 10 at-large delegates for each state, three district delegates for each member in the US House of Representatives, 4½ at-large delegates plus delegates equivalent to 60 percent of the states total Electoral College vote if the Republican candidate received these electoral votes in the previous election, and some additional delegates based on how many Republican office holders represent the state in Congress and in state-level offices.<sup>22</sup>

## Increased Media Presence and the Staged Convention

National conventions were once restricted to the enthusiastic partisans who traveled to the convention hall to participate in the deliberative process. With new technologies and the expansion of the mass media, the conventions were transformed to important national events. Initially, television provided almost gavel-to-gavel coverage of the convention proceedings, and the public took advantage of the coverage by watching the events unfold. For example, in 1976 the average household spent upwards of eleven hours watching the coverage

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<sup>21</sup> The Institute of Politics, John F. Kennedy School of Government, *Campaign for President: The Managers Look at 2008* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 140–2.

<sup>22</sup> Republican National Committee, *The Rules of The Republican Party*, 15–8.

on television.<sup>23</sup> Party officials recognized the revolutionary nature of television. Following the first fully televised Republican convention in 1952, the Democratic Party made cosmetic changes to their own convention with a television audience in mind.<sup>24</sup> And both parties continue to alter the format and layout of the convention program to suit the demands associated with televised coverage of a major, consequential event. Parties have made changes to the length of the convention. They have dropped daytime sessions. They organized the convention around overarching themes. They have limited the length of speeches. They have adjusted the ordering of proceedings to highlight aspects of their choosing during peak coverage hours. And they have worked to conceal any intra-party disagreements.<sup>25</sup> They are not always successful on the latter point, however, such as when supporters of 2012 candidate for the Republican nomination, Congressman Ron Paul, walked out of the convention to protest the fact that Paul was denied a speaking slot because he would not endorse Mitt Romney.

Conventions, today, are designed primarily as major media events. Television production experts and communication specialists are hired by both parties to help orchestrate the convention.<sup>26</sup> Everything down to the layout of the convention hall is designed with television viewers in mind.<sup>27</sup> Reporters in attendance are given greater access to the important proceedings and important people than the actual convention delegates.<sup>28</sup> In fact, the delegates are treated like extras and given banners, signs, and instructions to cheer and chant on cue. Beyond facilitating coverage of the conventions, the media, which devotes substantially less time covering the conventions than they did during the pre-reform periods, can dictate the content by committing to cover some aspects of the proceedings. For example, the 2012 Republican National Convention featured a highly praised video that they used to help introduce Romney. The video aired in full at the convention but not during primetime on the major networks. The convention organizers and the Romney campaign were criticized for this ordering of events, especially following the backlash that arose from the Eastwood empty chair incident. But this decision rested on what the networks were willing to cover and not on what the party wanted. Only one network, NBC, had committed to showing the film. Without the commitment from the other networks the

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**23** Thomas Patterson, Election Interest Is Up Sharply, But Convention Interest Is Not," Vanishing Voter Project, press release, July 21, 2004.

**24** Shafer, *Bifurcated Politics*.

**25** Shafer, *Bifurcated Politics*.

**26** Costas Panagopoulos, "Behind the Balloons: Political Consultants and the National Nominating Conventions," *Campaigns & Elections* (July 2004).

**27** Polsby and Wildavsky, *Presidential Elections*.

**28** John S. Jackson, *The Politics of Presidential Selection* (New York: Longman, 2001).

order was adjusted. The parties have made use of carefully produced videos in the past, but the networks have been largely unwilling to air extended videos in the most recent conventions.<sup>29</sup>

## Reviewing the Empirical Evidence: Convention Bumps

The effectiveness of a convention (at least in the short-term) is usually evaluated based on the magnitude of the convention “bump.” The bump is the increase in support that a candidate typically receives following the conclusion of his party’s convention relative to his preconvention level of support. At the most basic level, this can be calculated by subtracting his share of the two-party, pre-convention vote from his share of the two-party, post-convention vote in pre-election polls. The simplicity of the concept is somewhat convoluted by the varied approaches scholars have taken to measure the bump. Campbell, Cherry, and Wink developed the measurement most commonly used.<sup>30</sup> The pre-convention level of support is based on surveys conducted between six days and two weeks prior to the opening day of the convention. Post-convention support is based on surveys fielded the week after the close of the convention. The percentages used are based on the respondents who expressed a preference for one of the two major party candidates. Further debate exists around the decision to limit the analysis to a sample of likely voters or a sample of registered voters. To assess the magnitude of convention bumps, we use Gallup data from 1964 to 1988. The year 1964 is our starting point since reliable survey data is not available for earlier conventions. Gallup data is consistently available through the 2012 election, but recent research suggests this data may be susceptible to short-term fluctuations that may skew the results, especially when samples are narrowed based on the likelihood of participating in the election.<sup>31</sup> For this reason, ABC / *Washington Post* data is used for the 1992–2012 elections.<sup>32</sup>

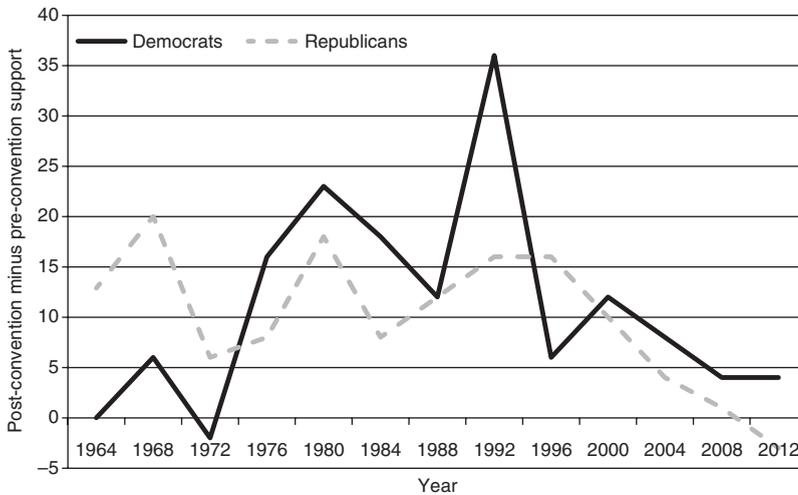
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**29** The Institute of Politics, John F. Kennedy School of Government, *Campaign for President: The Managers Look at 2012*, 181.

**30** James E. Campbell, Lynna Cherry, and Kenneth Wink, “The Convention Bump,” *American Politics Quarterly* 20, (1992), 287–307.

**31** Robert S. Erikson, Costas Panagopoulos, and Christopher Wlezien, “Likely (and Unlikely) Voters and the Measurement of Campaign Dynamics,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 68, (Winter 2004): 588–601.

**32** See Costas Panagopoulos, “Follow the Bouncing Ball: Assessing Convention Bumps, 1964–2004,” in *Rewiring Politics: Presidential Nominating Conventions in the Media Age*, ed. Costas Panagopoulos, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009) for a discussion of measurement.



**Figure 2:** Convention Bump, 1964–2012.

Source: Calculated by the authors from Gallup (1964–1988); ABC/Washington Post (1992–2012).

Preferences are measured based on surveys of registered voters taken immediately before and immediately following each party’s convention.

The bump that each candidate received following his convention has varied considerably across the last 13 conventions, and the fluctuations are displayed in Figure 2. On two occasions, the 1972 Democratic convention and the truncated 2012 Republican convention, the candidates’ support among registered voters dropped slightly from the pre-convention levels. On average, Democratic candidates enjoyed an 11-point bump while Republican candidates received just under a ten-point bump. This estimate is substantially larger than previous estimates of conventions bumps.<sup>33</sup> The largest spike for a Democratic candidate was 36 points by Bill Clinton in 1992. The highest bump for a Republican candidate was 20 points by Richard Nixon in 1968. Even though the average bumps are comparable between the two parties, they have been more variable for Democratic presidential candidates compared to those for Republican candidates with standard deviations of 10.4 and 6.8, respectively. For both parties, the size of the bump seems to be trending downward with the smallest three recorded bumps for the Republicans occurring in the last three cycles. The Democratic Party’s low points occurred in 1964 and 1972. However, in both 2008 and 2012 their convention bump was below average, but still better than the Republicans. Though historically small, the

<sup>33</sup> Cherry Campbell, and Wink, “The Convention Bump”; James E. Campbell, *The American Campaign* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000); Holbrook, *Do Campaigns Matter?*

recent bumps have been consequential. In addition to the surge in support, the bump received by Obama following the 2012 convention motivated his campaign to reexamine their Electoral College strategy and to aggressively challenge the Republicans in the seemingly perennial battleground state of Florida.<sup>34</sup>

The increase in candidate support following the conventions can have a lasting impact on the outcome of the election. While some research has found that part of the bump is temporary,<sup>35</sup> Campbell estimates that “a healthy portion,” about half of the net convention bump carries through to Election Day.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Shaw found the convention to be the most influential campaign event, with effects that extend through the end of the campaign with little decay from the size of the initial bump in candidate support.<sup>37</sup> Some research finds that the candidate that leaves the convention with a net gain in support not only maintains the gain through Election Day but also enjoys an additional, small increase in support.<sup>38</sup> In competitive elections, even these comparatively minor bumps can have a major impact on the final outcome of the presidential contest.

Scholars have proffered many explanations for the variability in the magnitude of convention bumps. The party that holds the first convention, typically the non-incumbent party tends to experience a larger post-convention bump. Campbell, Cherry, and Wink explain three possible reasons for this finding.<sup>39</sup> One, the first convention often occurs earlier in the campaign season when much of the electorate is either undecided or only tenuously committed to one of the candidates. More undecided voters provide greater opportunities for the conventions to earn their support. Convincing voters that have already decided on a candidate to change their support is a much more difficult task for even the most persuasive office seeker. Though the increased size of the convention bump for the party that holds the first convention is likely muted when parties hold their conventions back-to-back. In both 2008 and 2012, only a few days separated the closing gavel of the first party’s convention and the opening gavel of the second party’s convention with the parties holding their respective conventions in late August and early September. For 2016, the Democratic Party’s convention is scheduled to begin on July 25th, four days after the Republican Party’s convention culminates in Cleveland.

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<sup>34</sup> The Institute of Politics, John F. Kennedy School of Government, *Campaign for President: The Managers Look at 2012*, 187–9.

<sup>35</sup> Campbell, Cherry, and Wink, “The Convention Bump.”

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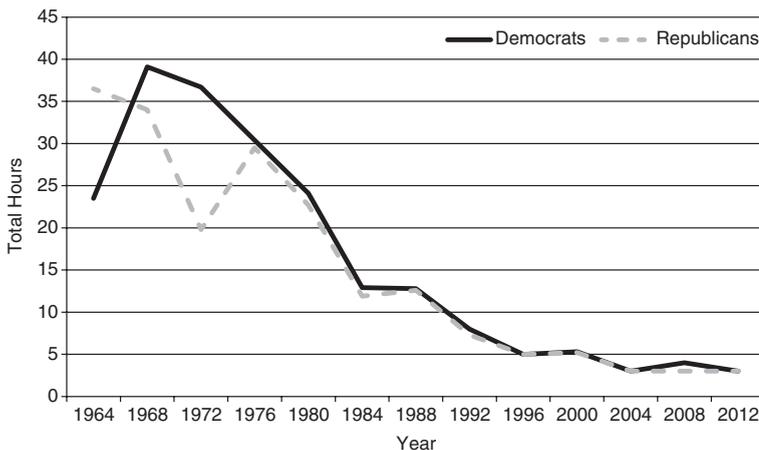
<sup>37</sup> Daron R. Shaw, “A Study of Presidential Campaign Event Effects from 1952 to 1992,” *Journal of Politics* 61, (1999), 387–422.

<sup>38</sup> Robert S. Erikson and Christopher Wlezien, *The Timeline of Presidential Elections: How Campaigns Do (and Do Not) Matter* (University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> Campbell, Cherry, and Wink, “The Convention Bump.”

A second reason the party holding the first convention typically enjoys a larger bump concerns the availability of information on the candidates. Information is not as readily available early in the campaign when the party's are just beginning to introduce their candidates to a larger audience. Undecided voters, are not only more likely to be influenced by what they learn during the convention but they are also more likely to seek out the information they need, perhaps by seeking out coverage of the conventions. Last, voters are generally less familiar with the challenging party, which typically holds the first convention, and their candidate.<sup>40</sup> In addition (and likely for similar reasons), the candidate trailing in the pre-convention polls usually enjoys a larger bump in post-convention support. On average, the trailing candidate has gained eight points following his convention while the leading candidate gains closer to five points.<sup>41</sup>

The relatively small bumps following the most recent conventions is perhaps unsurprising given how little time the networks have devoted to covering these conventions. Figure 3 documents the total hours of network coverage devoted to each party's convention from 1964 to 2012. The high points for both parties were in the 1960s prior to the reform movement when the networks would routinely devote 30–40 hours of unfiltered coverage of the proceedings. The networks have spent a fraction of that time covering the most recent conventions. In 2004, network coverage dropped to just three hours for each party and was again a



**Figure 3:** Network Coverage of Conventions, 1964–2012.

Source: Vital Statistics on American Politics.

<sup>40</sup> Holbrook, *Do Campaigns Matter?*

<sup>41</sup> Campbell, *The American Campaign*.

mere three hours in 2012. Analysis indicates the total number of combined hours covering the party's conventions has fallen by an average of almost six hours per election cycle (regressed on time and a constant, coefficient=-5.98; standard error=0.65;  $p < 0.001$ ;  $N=13$ ; Adjusted  $R^2=0.87$ ).

The low network coverage in recent years should not be too alarming since their counterparts on cable provide substantial coverage of each day's proceedings for individuals whom have access to cable and choose to expose themselves to hours of daily coverage. Though, large segment of the population do not have access to cable television. Of course this coverage includes commentary and analysis by the punditry class that could potentially weaken the effectiveness of partisan appeals by the candidates and the other convention speakers. The expanded coverage of the convention on the cable channels could explain while the ratings of the last few conventions have begun to increase at the same time the network coverage has declined.

## Tuning in to the Conventions

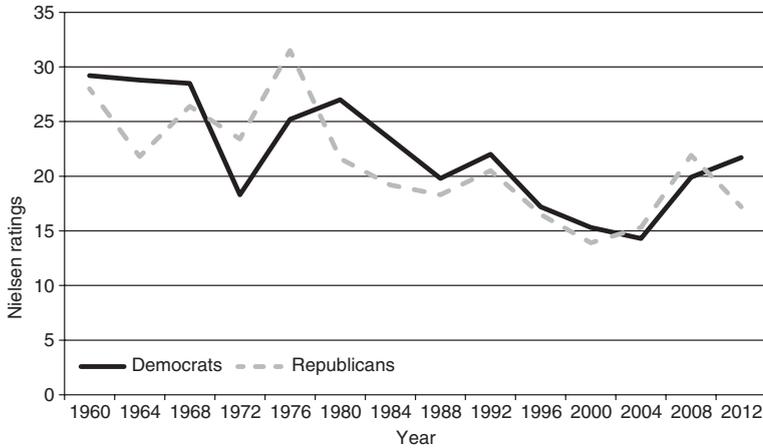
The percentage of households tuning into the conventions has fluctuated throughout the years based on the ratings compiled by the Nielsen Company.<sup>42</sup> The Nielsen Company collects viewership and demographic information for individuals and television households. Each rating point can be interpreted as one percent of the total television households in the US. Figure 4 presents the ratings for convention viewership from 1960 to 2012 separately for each party. The average rating for the Democratic Party's convention is 22.2 (standard error=1.34) and the average rating for the Republican Party's convention is 21.1 (standard error=1.33) across the 14 conventions. Ratings for the Republican and Democratic conventions recorded their lowest ratings in the 2000 and 2004 election years, respectively. Audience size has rebounded some in the recent elections. Both parties enjoyed a ratings boost in 2008 with the ratings increasing again in 2012 for the Democratic Party's convention.

Taking a closer look at the 2012 conventions, an analysis conducted by the Nielsen Company found that 57 percent of all US television households watched at least some coverage of either the Democratic or Republican Party's convention.<sup>43</sup> Individuals 55 and older tune into the conventions at a much higher rate than persons 18–34

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<sup>42</sup> "A Historical Look At Past Democratic and Republican National Conventions," 2012, <http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/newswire/uploads/2012/08/Conventions-Historic-TV-Ratings-Track.pdf>; Geoffrey Skelley, "Reviewing the Convention Ratings," Larry J. Sabato's Crystal Ball, September 13, 2012.

<sup>43</sup> "Convention Speeches By The Numbers," Last modified September 20, 2012, <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2012/convention-speeches-by-the-numbers.html>.



**Figure 4:** Convention Ratings, 1960–2012.

Source: Nielsen.

**Table 1:** Daily Ratings by Age Group, 2012 Conventions.

	Republican Convention			Democratic Convention		
	8/28	8/29	8/30	9/4	9/5	9/6
18–34	2.2	3.2	4.7	4.7	4.1	8.0
35–54	6.7	6.7	10.3	8.6	8.3	13.1
55+	18.8	17.6	22.5	19.5	19	23.0

Source: Nielsen.

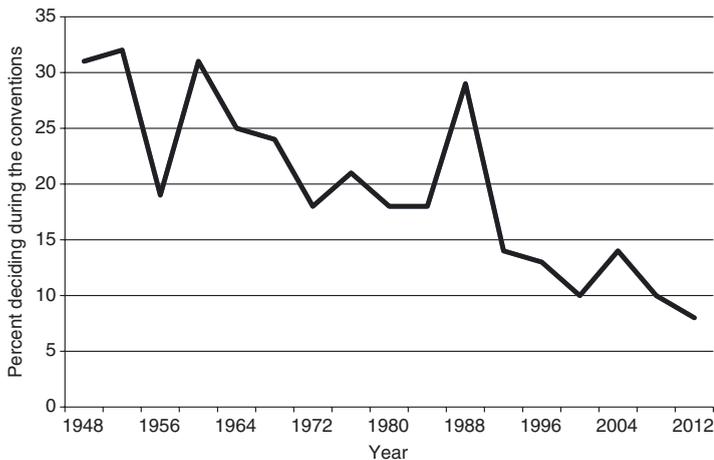
and persons 35–54. Table 1 displays the ratings for each age group on each day of the convention. Each party had three days of coverage since the first day of the Republican convention had virtually no activity and no coverage due to Hurricane Isaac. The ratings among young persons, ages 18–34 is a particularly weak point for both parties. Across the three days of the Republican convention, ratings among the young ranged from 2.2 to 4.7. Democrats did somewhat better with a low of 4.1 and a high of 8. Older voters are the one strong point for both parties, with those 55 and older tuning into the conventions at impressive rates, much higher than all other age groups.

## Deciding During the Conventions

The trend of holding conventions late in the summer combined with the decreasing network coverage likely reduce the number of people who are deciding which

candidate to cast their vote for during the conventions. Prior studies have posited an informational-based model of convention effects rooted in press coverage of the convention activities. Studies have found that the declining network coverage and the declining audience size are each linked to a decrease in the proportion of voters whom decide which candidate to vote for during the conventions.<sup>44</sup> Still, a sizable portion of the electorate claims to make voting decisions during the conventions. Figure 5 uses data from the American National Election Study (ANES) Cumulative File to present the proportion of respondents who indicated they decided which candidate to support during the conventions for the period 1948–2012. As expected, significantly fewer voters are making up their minds during the conventions in recent cycles, compared to the proportions deciding during the 1950s–1980s when both network coverage and convention ratings were higher.

The decline is notable, but about 10–15 percent of respondents in recent cycles report deciding during the conventions. While smaller than conventions past, this figure is generally larger than the proportion of voters who decide during any other campaign event including the debates. To get a better understanding of which voters are deciding which candidate to support during the



**Figure 5:** Vote Choice Decision Reached During Conventions.

Source: American National Elections Study, Cumulative File (1948–2012). Data is weighted. Data for 2008 was coded by the “2008 Open Ended Coding Project.” Data for 2012 was coded by the authors and only includes the face-to-face sample.

<sup>44</sup> Panagopoulos, “Follow the Bouncing Ball.”

conventions, we conducted a multivariate regression analysis (probit) of available ANES data to predict who decides during conventions (in contrast to deciding during other phases of the campaign cycle) as a function of key demographic and sociopolitical attributes. The dependent variable in our analysis is coded 1 if the respondent reported deciding which candidate to vote for during the conventions, and coded 0 if the respondent reported deciding during any other period of the campaign cycle. This variable is regressed on various demographic variables, political identifiers and dummy variables for each election year. Accordingly, the findings reflect general patterns and not cycle specific effects. Education, an interest in which candidate wins the presidential election, party identification (Republican), and strength of partisan intensity is each positive and statistically significant. The probability of deciding during the conventions increases by 0.003 for each movement towards the Republican Party, all else equal. Party identification is measured using the traditional seven-point scale ranging from strong Democrat (1) to strong Republican (7). More educated voters are also more likely to decide during the election. As the level of education increases, the probability of deciding during the election increases by about 0.02, all else equal. Voters with a stronger attachment to the parties are also more likely to decide during the conventions, with each increase in the level of intensity raising the probability of deciding during the conventions by 0.01, all else equal. Voters who report caring a great deal about which candidate wins the election also have a higher probability (0.07) of deciding during the conventions compared to individuals who do not care much about the outcome of the election. We find no statistically significant differences based on age, gender, or race.

One striking pattern showcased by the results of our estimation is that it is not generally citizens from the political periphery that decide which candidate to support during conventions. Instead, it is the most educated, interested and partisan voters who seem to be more likely to make up their minds during conventions compared to other campaign periods. These voters are often more politically attentive and informed, more likely to be targeted by campaigns, and, ultimately, more likely to vote on Election Day,<sup>45</sup> making them extremely

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<sup>45</sup> Robert C. Luskin, "Explaining Political Sophistication," *Political Behavior* 12, no. 4 (1990), 331–55; R. J. Herrnstein and C. Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); S. Rosenstone and J. M. Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1993); C. Panagopoulos and P. Francia, "Grassroots Mobilization in the 2008 Presidential Election," *Journal of Political Marketing* 8, no. 4 (2009), 315–33; P. Weilhouwer and C. Panagopoulos, "Polls and Elections – The Ground War 2000–2004: Strategic Mobilization in Presidential Campaigns," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (2008), 347–62.

**Table 2:** Decision Making During the Conventions, 1952–2012.

Independent Variables	Coefficients
Age	−0.00 (0.00)
Female	−0.02 (0.02)
Education	0.07*** (0.01)
Black	−0.05 (0.04)
Latino	−0.00 (0.08)
Other Race	−0.08 (0.08)
Care Who Wins Presidential Election	0.27*** (0.03)
Party ID (1=strong D, 7=strong R)	0.01* (0.01)
Party ID Intensity	0.04** (0.01)
Constant	−0.91*** (0.08)
N	18,450
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.05

Data is weighted and from the American National Election Studies. The dependent variable is a dichotomous variable for voters that decided which candidate to support during the conventions versus deciding at any other point during the campaign. Entries are probit regression coefficients with standard errors in parenthesis. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

valuable prospects, especially in elections as competitive as those observed in recent cycles.

## Looking Ahead to 2016

Overall, we conclude nominating conventions remain meaningful in contemporary presidential elections, in large part due to the fact that presidential contests have become increasingly competitive. We expect this pattern to persist in the 2016 presidential election cycle. The 2016 Republican Convention is scheduled to begin on July 18th in Cleveland, Ohio. The Democratic Convention is scheduled to begin the next week, on July 25th in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Both parties are holding their conventions much earlier than they have in the last five election cycles. The last time the Republicans held their convention in mid-July was 1980, and the Democrats have not started their convention as early as they are scheduled to do so in 2016 since 1992. Following the 2012 election, the Republican National Committee convened the Growth and Opportunity Project to evaluate ways in which the party can grow and increase the party's electoral success. One of the recommendations from this self-assessment was to hold the conventions earlier so that the party's nominee can move in to the general election phase of the campaign and begin

spending general election funds. This is partially an acknowledgement of the massive fundraising required of the candidates following the collapse of the federal public funding system in general elections; in 2008 and 2012, Barack Obama, and, in 2012, Mitt Romney rejected federal financing for their campaigns.<sup>46</sup> As the convention creeps earlier in the summer, so does the necessity for the party's nominee to secure the nomination earlier in the campaign season to begin planning the convention.

When all is said and done, conventions alone are unlikely to determine the eventual winner of the presidential election, but they are likely to play a non-negligible role in the process. Even if, as we described above, fewer voters watch or decide during conventions, recent presidential elections have become so competitive that even relatively minor preference shifts can be consequential. Conventions remain a central, focal point for contemporary elections and, perhaps more so than any other singular campaign event, retain the promise, if not always the reality, of shifting or solidifying the public's attention and the dynamics of the presidential race.

**Costas Panagopoulos** is Professor of Political Science and Director of the Center for Electoral Politics and Democracy and the graduate program in Elections and Campaign Management at Fordham University.

**Kyle Endres** is research fellow at the Center for Electoral Politics and Democracy at Fordham University and Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Government at The University of Texas at Austin.

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<sup>46</sup> Republican National Committee, *Growth and Opportunity Project*, (2013).