

Do You Want to be a National Convention Delegate?

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Last updated in 2016 from an article published in New Guard, the magazine of Young Americans for Freedom, 1987.

In early 1961 I decided to try to be a Goldwater delegate to the 1964 Republican National Convention. When Barry Goldwater beat the party establishment and won the G.O.P. Presidential nomination, I was his youngest delegate at San Francisco's Cow Palace. And I've been deeply involved in politics ever since.

In 1975 I wrote an article for the Young Americans for Freedom magazine New Guard entitled, "So You Want to Go To A Convention?" Oklahoman Steve Antosh read the article and followed my advice.

The next year, at age nineteen, Steve was elected a Reagan delegate to the G.O.P. National Convention. Four years later, in 1980, Steve, who was then chairman of Oklahoma State YAF, was the National Director of Youth for Reagan.

For you, as for Steve Antosh and for me, conservative activism could be the route to the Big Convention and, perhaps, a career in the public-policy process.

Hard Work Pays Off For Conservatives

If you're a liberal Democrat, and you're a black lesbian militant with a Spanish surname, the Democrats' convention rules are written for you. If you are a conservative -- Democrat or Republican -- chances are you'll have to work hard to win a seat on your state's national convention delegation.

Each state has its own rules for national convention delegate selection. States may and often do change their state laws and party rules between national conventions.

Under their national rules and U. S. Supreme Court decisions, state Democratic parties may adopt rules for national convention delegate selection which are inconsistent with state laws. The national Rules of the Republican Party now also provide that state Republican Party rules for national delegate selection prevail over state law on this subject.

Most delegates are elected in states with primaries, but primary and convention rules vary greatly from state to state. Learning your state's applicable laws and party rules is a key, first step toward becoming a delegate.

If your state is one of the many which have no presidential primary, you may have to mount a major operation to attract people to a caucus or win support from local delegates to a district or state convention.

If you already know how to draw a crowd, work a convention, use parliamentary procedure, form alliances, and count votes, you have a head start on the road to the Big Convention.

If your state elects delegates in a presidential primary, your problems will be somewhat different.

A primary can involve precinct organization, TV, radio, mailings, other advertising, social media, a great deal of money, and many, many more people than a convention.

It helps to be an expert at convention politics and primary election politics, but your personal reputation and your candidate preference are likely to prove much more important.

Some states have "winner take all" presidential primaries.

Other states use proportional representation. Under this system, presidential candidates who get a majority of the primary votes may get only a majority of the state's delegate votes, and candidates who received a sizable minority of the primary votes may get some delegate votes from the state.

Rules for delegate apportionment in proportional primary states vary widely.

In all states with primaries, delegate votes are bound for one or more ballots to specific candidates at the national convention by state rules, depending on the results of the state primaries. Candidates may "release" delegate votes that were bound to them.

In some primary states, delegates are elected by the party separately from the presidential primary.

Neither state conventions nor primaries can oblige the delegates to vote a certain way on other issues which may come before the national convention, such as credentials contests, the party platform, or proposed changes in the party's national rules.

You can see how important it is to work hard to familiarize yourself with the rules which govern the delegate selection process in your state.

In every state, whether delegates are selected by primaries or by conventions, the system is wide open at the bottom. Anyone can be a member of any party and participate in its delegate-selection process. You win if you get the most people to turn out for a primary, a caucus, or a convention.

Building Your Base

I began in early 1961 to consider the available routes in Louisiana to become a delegate to the 1964 G.O.P. nominating convention.

There seemed to be only two sorts of people elected delegates to national conventions: those who had worked long and hard for the party over many years, and those who had contributed substantial sums of money to the party and its candidates.

Neither avenue was open to me. I had neither the time nor the funds to qualify. To develop a third route, I settled on youth politics.

I helped organize Louisiana State University's YAF chapter in 1961. In 1962 I helped organized L.S.U.'s first College Republican club and was the first elected College Republican state chairman for Louisiana.

In 1963 and early 1964, I ran the youth campaign for Charlton Lyons, the G.O.P. candidate for governor of Louisiana. Mr. Lyons won eight, smashing, upset victories in college student mock elections, which raised my credit in the party. Later in the spring of 1964, I was elected state chairman of the Young Republicans.

I wore out my old Rambler organizing youth activities across the state.

Having worked closely with party leaders in all eight congressional districts, I became one of the handful of Republicans known to virtually every local leader who would be at the state convention. Senior party leaders were comfortable with me.

I ran for national delegate with the simple slogan: "Elect one young person." The 1964 Louisiana Republican state convention elected four at-large delegates to the 1964 G.O.P. convention: three well-off, veteran party activists and me.

The Team

Of course I would never have been a delegate if my presidential candidate, Barry Goldwater, had not been popular in the state party. I ran openly as a Goldwater supporter.

This brings me to the central fact for aspirants to delegate slots:

In a national presidential nomination contest, each candidate's district and state organizations may run slates of delegate candidates.

If you are not slated by a candidate's organization, you are very unlikely to be elected a national delegate at a district or state convention or in a state primary. While occasionally, particularly

in a convention state, a party senior statesman can be elected as an uncommitted delegate, newcomer mugwumps (those who sit on the fence with their mug on one side and their "wump" on the other) go nowhere.

Why might a candidate's state organization want you on their team? Here are some questions your candidate's organization will consider when you ask to be slated as a delegate or alternate delegate:

1. Are you committed to our candidate?
2. Are your commitments ever shaken by pressure, threats or bribes?
3. Do you have personal supporters whose help would strengthen our candidate's entire slate of delegates?
4. Will you be a hard-working campaigner for our slate?
5. Are you sure to attend the national convention?
6. Will you be useful to our candidate in winning more delegates to our side at the national convention?
7. Do you have support and contacts in our candidate's national organization?
8. Is there any likelihood you will say or do something foolish to damage our candidate?
9. Is there anything in your background which would embarrass our candidate?
10. Do we like you?

If you are philosophically sound, technologically proficient, and movement oriented, you should pass muster on all these questions. Being a well-known volunteer leader would increase your chances of being slated by your candidate's organization.

Alternatives May Work For You

You don't have to be a delegate to go to a presidential nominating convention, of course.

An alternate delegate has all the rights and privileges of a delegate except voting. An alternate delegate may have a better time, because at contested conventions delegates are encouraged not to leave the convention floor even during dull speeches.

In fact, you do not have to be either a delegate or an alternate delegate to have an impact on the events at a convention.

When I was a Goldwater delegate in 1964, my major accomplishment at the national convention in San Francisco was minor, as a volunteer stuffing campaign envelopes for other delegates in the Goldwater mailroom.

In 1968, as a Reagan alternate delegate, I was able to help convince a couple of uncommitted delegates to vote for Reagan.

At the 1972 G.O.P. convention, I was neither delegate nor alternate. But I worked successfully with the conservative forces fighting the well-organized, well-funded liberal attempt to change the national party rules governing delegate allocation and bonus delegates.

A plan I drafted, which came to be known as the California Compromise (or the Briar Patch Plan), was adopted by the 1972 convention after a major, nationally televised, conservative vs. liberal fight.

The principal speaker for my plan was California Governor Ronald Reagan. Since 1972, that delegate allocation plan has withstood liberal challenges in court and at all subsequent G.O.P. national conventions. It still governs the allocation of delegates to the convention.

The circumstances back in 1972, when I was not even an alternate delegate, permitted me to have my biggest impact to date on what went on at a presidential nominating convention.

Since 1964, I've participated actively in each of the GOP national conventions, usually as a delegate or alternate delegate and, since 1988, as a member of my party's national committee. So don't miss a national convention just because you can't be a delegate.

Start Now

In politics you can start late, but you can never start too early.

Maximize your effectiveness by joining your candidate's campaign organization as soon as you can. Call your candidate's office. Sign on early as an activist. The election laws put a premium on volunteer efforts. You should be welcomed with open arms.

Your work for your candidate, not whether or not you are a delegate, will determine your position in your candidate's convention organization.

The Big Convention comes only once every four years. It's too good an opportunity to miss. If you are serious about becoming a delegate or alternate, you should get a copy of your state party's rules from local or state party officials, or from your candidate's state or national organization.

Conservatism is now politically fashionable. But few people will beg you to assume leadership. As author Paul Johnson wrote, leadership, in its essence, is a combination of courage and judgment.

If you plan carefully, work hard, and keep alert for good breaks, you may make a difference at a national convention. And you'll learn a lot.