

Speculation Over Contested Conventions Intensifies As Primaries and Caucuses Continue Across the U.S.

Understanding a Contested Convention



Each state holds a primary, caucus, or presidential selection contest, which binds delegates to vote for a specific candidate. (Many states also send delegates which are unbound to vote for a specific candidate, sometimes called “superdelegates.”)

<50%

If no candidate wins more than 50 percent of the available delegates by the end of the primary season, no candidate can be labeled a presumptive nominee.



At the national convention, delegates will conduct a first round of voting (also known as the first ballot), following their respective state commitments. If no candidate wins a majority, convention rules for both parties state **that subsequent rounds of voting must be called until a majority is reached.**



While rules vary on a state-by-state basis, **most states “release” their delegates after the first ballot,** allowing each delegate the ability to change his or her vote in subsequent ballots. Candidates can then attempt to sway delegates. Negotiations last until a majority is found.

A party could consolidate around a candidate who didn’t initially run for the presidency. In 1844, Democrats rallied around **James K. Polk after 9 rounds of contested voting** on different candidates. In 1880, Republicans held 35 rounds of voting between President Ulysses S. Grant and James G. Blaine before **consolidating around dark-horse candidate James Garfield on the 36th ballot.** However, it is worth noting that both of these contested conventions were held **before presidential primary elections were introduced** in the 1900s.

Sources: Republican National Committee, “Rules of the Republican Party,” August 8, 2014; Democratic National Committee, “Delegate Selection Materials for the 2016 Democratic National Convention,” December 15, 2014; New York Times, “On This Day, June 5, 1880,” 2001; John C. Pinheiro “James K. Polk, Campaigns and Elections,” Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia; Images by Re Jean Soo, Ryan Shorter and Luis Prado, made available through The Noun Project.