



Elections

Are Republicans headed for a 'brokered convention'?

What's the story?

On 20th March 2016, the Chairman of the Republican National Committee (RNC), Reince Priebus, said that the party was preparing for the possibility of a 'brokered convention' in July. This is where the delegates attending the party's national convention have to vote in multiple ballots in order to select the party's candidate for the presidential election. Many have suggested that the RNC welcomes this possibility as a means to prevent the current frontrunner, Donald Trump, from winning the nomination.

What exactly is a brokered convention?

The primaries and caucuses currently taking place across the US are being held to select delegates to attend the Republican National Convention in July, where the party's presidential candidate will be officially nominated. To secure the nomination, a single candidate needs to win 1,237 delegates in the state contests - a majority of the 2,472 delegates who will attend, and vote, at the convention. Some states allocate their delegates on a 'winner takes all' basis, others are proportional, and some allocate delegates based on the results in each congressional district. The rules vary from state to state, but most states 'bind' their delegates, requiring them to vote for the candidate chosen by their district or state. However, if no candidate secures a majority by the time of the final primaries on June 7th, then the party will be headed for a brokered convention. After the first round of voting, many of the 'bound' delegates will become free to vote for any candidate of their choice and the whole contest becomes open again. The frontrunner could suddenly find that a majority of delegates decide to vote for someone else. The rules for when delegates become 'unbound' vary. Some states bind their candidates for one ballot, others for two. Some states have already released delegates bound to candidates that have dropped out of the race. Other states bind their delegates until their pledged candidate releases them.

How likely is a brokered convention?

Of the 17 candidates that were standing at the beginning of the Republican primaries, only three remain – Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, John Kasich. As of 22nd March, Donald Trump is the clear frontrunner, with 739 delegates. Ted Cruz is second with 465 delegates, and John Kasich is far behind with only 143 delegates. To secure the nomination, Trump needs to win a further 498 of the 944 delegates that are yet to be allocated. This is possible, but not inevitable. Trump has so far won 48% of the delegates that have been awarded, but he will need to win 52.7% of the remaining delegates. If Trump is to win a majority, it will likely happen on the final day of the primary season. On 7th June, over 300 delegates will be awarded across California, Montana, New Jersey, New Mexico and South Dakota. As states award their delegates in different ways, some contests will be much more crucial than others. For example, New York will award its 95 delegates proportionally, unless a single candidate wins over 50% of the vote, in which case all 95 delegates will go to the majority winner. Despite his last place position, Kasich has remained in the race because he believes that "nobody's going to have the delegates they need going to the convention. Everyone will fall short". He said that when that happens, "delegates are going to consider two things: number one, who can win in the fall, and I'm the only one that can. And number two, a really crazy consideration, like who could actually be president of the United States."

Debate! If there is a brokered convention, and delegates end up nominating a candidate other than Trump, will this help or hurt the party's chances of winning the 2016 presidential election? Nominating a more moderate establishment candidate will likely help the party appeal to more independent voters. However, claims that the 'establishment' had undemocratically conspired against Trump could lead his supporters to stay at home on election day. Which problem should the RNC be most concerned about?



How does this fit into your exams?

Elections

If Donald Trump does fail to win a majority of delegates ahead of the Republican National Convention, and if this brokered convention does rally behind an establishment candidate, then this will raise a number of very important points when considering the effectiveness of the nomination process, and the importance of both the national convention, and party leadership. Since the McGovern-Fraser reforms of the 1970s, both the Democratic and Republican parties have given voters greater influence over the selection of their presidential candidates. While the national conventions still officially nominate each party's candidate, this has largely become ceremonial, as a single candidate usually secures a majority of delegate votes ahead of the convention. This change has been said to have greatly reduced the party establishment's power over the choice of nominee, opening up the contest to give more outsider candidates, favoured by grassroots activists, a greater chance of winning. This has contributed to a theory of 'party decline', which states that political parties are increasingly losing their influence, largely replaced by increasingly influential donors, pressure groups and activists.

A brokered convention, and the nomination of a candidate other than Trump, would greatly challenge this narrative. A brokered convention would encourage the very establishment deal making that primaries and caucuses were supposed to prevent. Around 7% of delegates attending the national convention are members of the RNC from each state, who are automatically given a seat. Winning candidates, as per some state rules, choose another 15% of delegates. But the rest of the delegates are chosen at state conventions and meetings, which tend to be given less attention by normal voters, and are much more heavily influenced by the party establishment. Some delegates may be fairly ordinary party members, with regular jobs outside of politics, but others will be elected officials and dedicated party activists. Becoming a delegate can take considerable time, energy, and money, as the party does not pay for the flights and hotel costs that are necessary for attending a convention held in another state. As a result, many of the delegates are likely to be members of the 'establishment', a broad term that Republican grassroots activists use to refer to elected officials, donors and full time political professionals. While many states bind delegates to district and state results, this is often only for the first vote. If Trump fails to win a majority, then he could fail to win the nomination. The 'establishment' may be able to send large numbers of delegates who are willing to back an anti-Trump candidate at the earliest opportunity. For example, in South Carolina, only delegates who attended the 2015 State Convention, held prior to the start of Trump's campaign, can go to the 2016 national convention. Trump won all 50 of South Carolina's delegate votes in the primary, but it is the party establishment that is in the stronger position to influence the selection of the final delegates. Party leaders can negotiate with key delegates they have long known and worked with.

If Trump does fail to win the nomination despite winning the most delegates prior to the convention, then this will also call into question the democratic credentials of the modern primary process. The RNC would likely argue that voters have been given the opportunity to have their say, but, as no single candidate has won a majority, it is sensible to leave the decision to peer review, as the establishment's experience makes them well qualified to select a strong candidate, who will go on to be a successful president. However, Ted Cruz disagrees, arguing, "If the Washington deal-makers try to steal the nomination from the people, I think it would be a disaster. It would cause a revolt". Similarly, Trump has warned, or threatened according to some commentators, that there will be "riots", and "problems like you've never seen before" if he falls a few votes short of a majority and is not given the nomination.

Think about how you could use this case study in the following questions...

In the style of AQA – "The national conventions have lost all significance." Discuss. (25 Marks)

In the style of Edexcel – "US political parties are in a constant state of decline." Discuss. (25 Marks)

OCR – Discuss the merits of presidential primaries and caucuses as a method of selecting presidential candidates. (25 Marks)