

Political Parties and Conventions

Overview

In this lesson, students will compare and contrast American political parties with an emphasis on the two major parties, Democratic and Republican. Students will then explore the process by which party leaders and platforms are chosen. Students will then participate in either a Democratic or Republican mock convention. Finally, assuming the roles of prominent party leaders and reporters, students will participate in a mock press conference and prepare written editorials explaining which candidate they support and why.

Grade

Middle & High School

Essential Questions

- What is a political party?
- Why do political parties exist?
- What are the fundamental values and beliefs of the prevailing parties?
- What is a party “platform?”
- What are “third parties” and what role do they play in politics?
- What is accomplished at each party’s Convention?
- How are party representatives selected?
- How do citizens select candidates to support?
- What are the dangers of voting along partisan lines?

Materials:

- “Political Parties & Conventions Power Point” (optional); available in the Database of K-12 Resources in PDF format
 - This PPT provides an overview of the two major political parties, explains America’s two-party system, introduces third parties, explains the functions of political parties, and discusses political conventions. Teachers should edit the PPT (adding and omitting slides as they see fit) based on what students already know and need to know.
 - To view this PDF as a projectable presentation, save the file, click “View” in the top menu bar of the file, and select “Full Screen Mode”
 - To request an editable PPT version of this presentation, send a request to CarolinaK12@unc.edu
- Images of donkey and elephant, attached or available on Slide 4 of the “Political Parties PPT”
- “Democratic Party Platform” & “Republican Party Platform”, handout attached
- “Am I a Democrat or Republican?”, article attached
 - Optional: For a more updated quiz to determine party affiliation, teachers can assign an online quiz from <http://www.isidewith.com/> or <http://www.people-press.org/quiz/political-typology/>
- Venn Diagram graphic organizer
- “How Political Conventions Work,” reading attached
- Assignment Sheet for Convention Activity, attached
- Art supplies: markers, crayons, poster board, etc.
- Note Sheet for Party Platform Presentations

Duration

- One 60-minute period for Day 1 (time will vary based on how much of the PPT is used and how in depth student discussion is.)

- Additional class time will be needed for the preparation and presentation of the political convention activity

Procedure

Day 1

Democratic vs. Republican: What's the Difference?

1. As a warm-up, write the words "**Political Party**" on the board and ask students to write down anything they know with regards to the phrase, either in small groups or as a class. (If utilizing the "Political Parties PPT," this warm-up can be found on [Slide 2](#).) Encourage students to think about what political parties are, why they exist, what their goals are, examples of different types of parties, prominent leaders of each party, which values each party represents, etc. When students are finished, have some of them read what they wrote. Write down relevant ideas on the board. This will be a good way to gauge prior knowledge and to get students participating for the day.
2. Share the definition on [Slide 3](#):
 - **Political Party**: an organized group of people with common values and beliefs who try to get their candidates elected to political office
3. Explain to students that political parties exist because people with common values and beliefs are more effectively able to express their ideals in groups as opposed to individually. Ask them to consider the following question: If you were trying to influence a political leader, or even the manager of the department store you worked in, do you think it would be better to have others working toward the same goal with you, or would it be better to "go it alone?"
4. Project the images of the donkey and the elephant on the overhead (attached or available on [Slide 4](#) if using the "Political Parties PPT." Ask students if they know what the symbols represent, encouraging them to use context clues. If they cannot guess, explain to them that the images represent the two major political parties in America, the **Democrats** (donkey) and the **Republicans** (elephant).
 - **The Donkey**— ([Slide 5](#)) Presidential candidate Andrew Jackson was the first Democrat ever to be associated with the donkey symbol. His opponents during the election of 1828 tried to label him a "jackass" for his "stubborn" populist beliefs and slogan, "Let the people rule." Jackson was entertained by the notion and ended up using it to his advantage on his campaign posters. But cartoonist Thomas Nast is credited with making the donkey the recognized symbol of the Democratic Party. It first appeared in a cartoon in *Harper's Weekly* in 1870, and was supposed to represent an anti-Civil War faction. But the public was immediately taken by it and by 1880 it had already become the unofficial symbol of the party.
 - **The Elephant**— ([Slide 6](#)) Political cartoonist Thomas Nast was also responsible for the Republican Party elephant. In a cartoon that appeared in *Harper's Weekly* in 1874, Nast drew a donkey clothed in lion's skin, scaring away all the animals at the zoo. One of those animals, the elephant, was labeled "The Republican Vote." That's all it took for the elephant to become associated with the Republican Party. Source: <http://www.infoplease.com/askeds/donkey-elephant.html>
5. Explain to students that the Democratic and Republican parties exist in response to some very fundamental questions about the role of government in citizens' lives. The members of each party do not necessarily all feel the exact same way about every issue, but the parties have adopted some basic beliefs that usually reflect the beliefs of their members. In fact, each political party actually writes these beliefs down in list form to clarify what they stand for. This list is called a "platform." Project [Slide 7](#) and discuss:
 - **Party Platform**: a list of the principles which a political party supports in order to appeal to the general public for the purpose of having a party's candidate(s) voted into office. This often takes the form of a list of support for, or opposition to, controversial topics. Individual topics are often called **planks** of the platform. The platform of a Party is discussed at each Party's political convention, which will be discussed later in the lesson.

- Discuss:
 - What do you already know about the platforms of the two major political parties, Democrats and Republicans?
6. Tell students they are going to spend a bit of time exploring the differences (and similarities) in the two major political parties. Have students partner up and provide each set with the attached handouts: “Democratic Party Platform,” “Republican Party Platform,” and “Democrat or Republican?” Instruct students to create a Venn diagram on notebook paper and to fill it in as they read through the handouts, noting all differences and similarities among the parties. Let students know that this exercise will give them insight into the major topics of each platform, as well as each party’s stance on the topics.
 7. After approximately 15 minutes, discuss as a class the major issues and how parties differ on each issue. You may want to create a “class” diagram on the board or overhead as you discuss. Further discuss:
 - How do you think most people choose which party to align themselves with? Do you think most Americans are educated regarding what the two parties stand for? What if you agree with both parties on different issues?
 - What stereotypes exist about Republicans and Democrats? How do you think such stereotypes came to be?
 8. Project the political cartoons on Slides 8 – 9 and have students discuss:
 - What do you see/first notice about this cartoon?
 - What message is the artist trying to convey and what evidence makes you think this?
 - Do you think the artist is a Republican or a Democrat and why?
 9. Next, ask students if any of them can identify any other political parties other than Democrats and Republicans. Further, ask if they can identify any past presidents who were from a party other than Democrat and Republican. Tell students they are going to learn a bit about the history of political parties in the US and focus on America’s two-party system. Go through the following slides posing the discussion questions contained on each:
 - Slides 10-11: Addressed the history of political parties
 - Slides 12-17: Explains America’s two-party system, the pros and cons of such, and introduces Independents and Third Parties.
 - Slides 18-20: Explains the functions of political parties

Teacher Note: For an alternate lesson plan regarding party affiliation, see Carolina K-12’s “Are You a Democrat or a Republican? Are You *Really*?” lesson plan, available here: <http://k12database.unc.edu/files/2016/09/RepublicanorDemocrat.pdf>

Political Conventions

10. Continue on the Slide 21, which provides an overview of the election process. (See also Carolina K-12’s lesson “The Electoral College.”)
11. At Slide 22, ask students if they have heard of the term “convention” as it relates to political parties. Explain that the major political parties meet to set their agendas (make decisions regarding issues of concern for their party) and nominate candidates for political office at **political conventions**. Go through Slides 23-26 which provides an overview about conventions.
12. Provide students with the attached “How Political Conventions Work” and instruct them to read and answer the corresponding questions. (This can be done individually in class or as homework, or in class in partners.)

Day 2

Prepare for Your Own Political Convention

13. Begin the next class by going over the questions from “How Political Conventions Work,” going over anything that isn’t clear. Inform students that as a culminating group assignment, they are going to be hosting a mock Democratic and Republican Convention in class. They will work in groups of four to determine a platform and prepare a speech for either the Republican or Democratic Convention. On the assignment’s due date, students will host their convention by presenting their speeches to the convention (i.e., the remainder of class.)
 - **Teacher Note:**
 - Rather than having students create their own candidate speeches, teachers also have the option of further assigning each group an actual candidate to research and write a speech for. This will result in students not only familiarizing themselves with the party platforms, but also particular Republican and Democratic candidates.
 - Teachers also have the option of including a third convention for Independents/Third Parties (i.e. Libertarian, Green Party, Tea Party, etc.).
14. Prior to class, teachers should determine how to divide students into groups of four. Options include:
 - Have students draw slips of paper that determine whether or not they will work on the Democratic or Republican Convention, as well as assign them a group number. Explain to students that while they may end up assigned to a party that their own beliefs don’t align with, they can use this as an opportunity to learn more about their political opponents.
 - Allow students to self-select whether they want to work on the Democrat or Republican Convention. They can then choose their own groups of four, or teachers can assign groups based on their Democratic or Republican preference. Teachers run the risk of an uneven amount of students choosing Democrat and Republican, but it is fine if one final convention is smaller than the other.
15. Hand out the attached assignment sheet and go over it in detail with students. Let students know that on the assignment due date (aka, the opening day of the mock convention), each group will don their campaign materials and support each candidate as he/she delivers their speech.
16. If possible, allow students access to computers with internet access for additional research. In their research, students may want to consult the websites for past or upcoming political conventions, such as:
 - <http://www.demconvention.com/>
 - <http://convention.gop/>
 - **Teacher Note:** Before students begin working independently, teachers may want to show an example from a speech from a past political convention. A simple internet search will provide numerous examples. Teachers can also provide handouts of excerpts from past convention speeches for an example. Transcripts of past convention speeches are available at: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/nomination.php>.
17. Teachers should determine how much class time and/or homework time students will have to prepare. On the due date, ask students to reconvene in their groups, with all Democratic groups meeting on one side of the room and Republican groups meeting on the other. Allow students 10-15 minutes at the beginning of class to complete final preparations for their convention. Teachers should assist both parties in determining the order of candidate presentations. (Whoever is chosen to go first should offer a small message of welcome. Likewise, whoever goes last should thank everyone for coming and conclude the convention.) Students can also use this time to work together and plan for any chanting or other staged convention actions.
 - **Teacher Notes:**

- The final conventions can be held on different days, or can be presented on the same day by grouping all of one party's speeches during the first half of class and the other party's during the second half of class. Teachers should flip a coin to determine which convention is held first.
- **Teacher Note:** If the class is spending a lot of time on this activity, you may want to allow them to decorate the classroom with balloons, streamers, etc.

18. Go over respectful audience behavior and explain to students the procedure for the convention presentations:

- When it is your party's turn to present, each candidate will take turns going to the front of the room to deliver their speech.
- All audience members will assume the same party of the candidates who are presenting. Students who worked on the party opposite of those speaking should not challenge or heckle the presenters. (Listening to both party's speeches will assist students in gaining a deeper understanding of each party's platform.)
- While candidates present, audience members should take notes on the sheet provided (see attached).
- At the conclusion of the two conventions, students can then discuss which party they personally align with and why.

19. At the conclusion of both conventions, discuss:

- What were the various issues identified in the speeches? Are these issues that typically make up the party's platform (Democrat or Republican?)
- Which speech struck you most and why? (Note whether student responses center around the content of their favorite speeches, or the presentation style. Discuss how these two aspects are also at play in real politics.)
- Were any major issues left out of either party's conventions?
- Overall, do you think political parties are a positive aspect of American elections? Why or why not?

20. As a culminating writing assignment, have students respond to the following question:

- Based on what you've learned in class and participation in the two conventions, which party do you think best represents your interests? Why? If you do not find yourself aligning with either party, discuss why.

Additional Resources:

- How do Caucuses Work: <http://people.howstuffworks.com/question721.htm>
- How Political Primaries Work: <http://people.howstuffworks.com/primary.htm>
- How the Electoral College Works: <http://history.howstuffworks.com/american-history/electoral-college.htm>
- How the Green Party Works: <http://people.howstuffworks.com/green-party.htm>
- Full 2016 Republican Party Platform: <https://www.gop.com/the-2016-republican-party-platform/>
- Full 2016 Democratic Party Platform: <https://www.demconvention.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Democratic-Party-Platform-7.21.16-no-lines.pdf>

2012 Democratic Party Platform

Abortion

Strongly and unequivocally support Roe v. Wade.

Budget & Economy

Create an economy built to last & built from the middle out.

Civil Rights

Enable disability access; plus 100,000 federal jobs.
Equal treatment under law for same-sex couples.

Corporations

Auto manufacturers have paid back loans & drive the recovery.

Education

Turn around struggling public schools; expand public options.
Double investment in Pell Grants & more tax credits.

Energy & Oil

Preserve ANWR but explore for oil responsibly elsewhere.

Free Trade

Double our exports by 2015 with new trade agreements.

Government Reform

Curb the influence of lobbyists; no to Citizens United.

Gun Control

Right to own firearms is subject to reasonable regulation.

Health Care

No arbitrary insurer cancelation; yes pre-existing condition.
Preserve promise of Medicare; don't privatize or voucherize.

Immigration

DREAM Act for now; comprehensive reform next.

Jobs

Bridge to Work: help the long-term unemployed.

Social Security

Preserve promise of Social Security; don't privatize.

Tax Reform

Cut taxes for every working family, but not millionaires.

Welfare & Poverty

Partner with faith-based organizations to serve the needy.

Source: http://ontheissues.org/2012_DNC_Platform.htm

2012 Republican Party Platform

Abortion

Support human life amendment; oppose abortion funding.

Budget & Economy

Inflation is a hidden regressive tax.
Audit the Federal Reserve; bring more transparency.
Balanced Budget Amendment & super-majority for tax increase.
Shrink the FHA, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac.

Civil Rights

Constitutionally define marriage as one man & one woman.

Corporations

World's highest corporate tax rate cripples job creation.

Crime

Criminals behind bars cannot harm the public.

Education

Shift to community colleges and technical institutions.
No federal college loans; just insure private loans.

Energy & Oil

Open ANWR and OCS for oil & gas development.

Environment

Conservation is a conservative value, but balance economics.

Foreign Policy

Transition to a post-Assad Syria and independent Lebanon.
Model foreign aid on Millennium Challenge Corporation.
Castro regime in Cuba is a state-sponsor of terrorism.

Free Trade

Restore presidential Trade Promotion Authority.
Countervailing duties against China on intellectual property.

Government Reform

Keep Electoral College; no national popular vote.
Repeal McCain-Feingold; no contribution limits.
Require photo ID to fight voter fraud.
No statehood for the District of Columbia.

Gun Control

Right to obtain and store ammunition without registration.

Health Care

Repeal ObamaCare; it is an attack on our Constitution.

Homeland Security

No aerial surveillance over US soil.
Privatize the TSA and end frisking.
Respond to proliferation of transnational terrorism.
National Military Strategy to deter rogue aggression.

Immigration

Make E-verify mandatory nationwide.

Jobs

Support employee ownership over union elites.
The best jobs program is economic growth.

Principles & Values

Support prayer in public schools.
The GOP is the Great Opportunity Party.

Social Security

Give workers control over their retirement investments.

Technology

Infrastructure via civil engineering, not social engineering.
Invest in cutting-edge cybersecurity technologies.

War & Peace

Prevent Iran from building and possessing nuclear weapons.

Welfare & Poverty

Religious charities foster benevolence and patriotism.

Source: http://ontheissues.org/2012_RNC_Platform.htm

Democrat or Republican?

So, you've heard the words Democrat and Republican. But, what do they mean? Which political party best matches your views? Perhaps you don't align yourself with either?

Sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between the parties because the issues are infinitely more complex than the messages of 30-second campaign commercials on television or 8-second "sound bites" heard on the evening news. Additionally, politicians are always trying to say things that are popular and most political discourse in the United States is filtered through both the lens of the media and the notion of an "either-or" two-party system.

It is also incorrect to suggest that all Democrats share the same beliefs or that there are no factions within the Republican Party. In general, Democrats are more *liberal* in that they favor progressive change in society, freedoms from government intervention into one's private and social life, and regulations on economic activity and businesses. In general, Republicans are more *conservative* in that they favor traditional institutions and the status quo, restrictions on private and social activities, and freedoms from government controls over economic activity and businesses. Yet, not all Democrats are liberal and all Republicans conservative. For instance, people – or both parties and political ideologies – in the American South tend to be more conservative, while their neighbors in the Northeast and West Coast are typically more liberal. Also, not everyone adheres to the principles of the two major parties and there are several minor or "third parties" in the United States, although they rarely get their candidates elected.

Nonetheless, there are some noticeable differences in the political parties. In brief, Democrats tend to favor an active role for government in society and believe that such involvement – be it environmental regulations against polluting or anti-discrimination laws – can improve the quality of our lives and help achieve the larger goals of opportunity and equality. On the other hand, Republicans tend to favor a limited role for government in society and believe that such reliance on the private sector (businesses and individuals) – be it avoiding unnecessary environmental regulations or heavy-handed anti-discrimination laws – can improve economic productivity and help achieve the larger goals of freedom and self-reliance.

Below are some issues that are frequently discussed by the news media and politicians. Every four years during a presidential election, both major parties convene at a national convention and draft a platform, which is an agenda for the next four years and spells out their positions on the issues of the day. The current party platforms reveal the parties' positions on the following dozen controversial issues:

Issues

1. Abortion

Democrats: Abortion is a woman's right and should be legal

Republicans: Abortion should be illegal and restricted by government

2. Flag Burning

Democrats: Flag burning is political speech and is protected by the Constitution

Republicans: Protect the flag from burning by a constitutional amendment

3. Gun Control

Democrats: Favor/Gun control is needed

Republicans: Oppose/Gun control is unconstitutional

4. Natural Environment

Democrats: Strong regulations are needed to protect the environment

Republicans: Strong environmental laws harm the economy

5. Race Relations

Democrats: Strong anti-discrimination laws are needed
Republicans: People and businesses can be trusted not to discriminate

6. Minimum Wage

Democrats: Favor/Increase the minimum wage to help workers
Republicans: Oppose/Do not raise the minimum wage because it hurts businesses

7. Healthcare

Democrats: Government should require universal access to healthcare
Republicans: Private insurers are preferable to government mandates

8. Taxes

Democrats: Increase taxes on the wealthy to pay for public programs
Republicans: Cutting taxes for everyone helps the economy

9. Military

Democrats: Cut military spending; expand veteran's benefits; act in concert with other nations and/or with support from NATO and the UN
Republicans: Increase military spending; cut veteran's benefits; don't be constrained by other nations or by NATO and the UN

10. Death Penalty

Democrats: Oppose/It is not a deterrent and innocent people are in jeopardy
Republicans: Favor/The death penalty is necessary and effective

11. Gay Rights

Democrats: Favor/Gays rights and marriage are civil rights
Republicans: Oppose/Marriage is a sacred trust between a man and woman

12. Prayer in School

Democrats: Oppose/Violation of the separation between church and state
Republicans: Favor/It is a religious right and our Judeo-Christian heritage

Think about whether you feel government has an inherent and fundamental role to play in society in promoting equality and opportunity, or whether such goals are best served by limited the role of government and relying on individuals, businesses, or even religious organizations. In what facets of society is more government involvement – be it support or regulation – needed? In what facets of society is government too intrusive or unnecessary? Think about each issue listed above and determine your position on the issue. By adding up your stance on these dozen issues you can get a rough sense of your political party affiliation.

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Introduction to How Political Conventions Work

From "How Stuff Works" - <http://people.howstuffworks.com/political-convention.htm/printable>

The political convention is a uniquely American tradition, one that is focused on the political parties that have defined Americans' choices in government for nearly 175 years. Political conventions, and the party system they are an integral part of, are not mentioned in the U.S. Constitution. Indeed, the founding fathers of American government viewed political parties with distrust or outright hostility. Yet today, Americans can hardly imagine a government without political parties, and the parties' conventions are enormous, televised media events.

In this article, we'll learn how political conventions came about, how they have changed, and what they are used for. We'll also look at some famous events at political conventions in American history.

Functions of Conventions

Originally, the main purpose of political conventions was to **nominate the party's candidate for president**. In the 1800s, the movement in the United States was to place more political power directly in the hands of the citizens. Political conventions were one way of doing this: Previously, candidates were nominated in secret caucuses by members of Congress; candidates would now be chosen by delegates who were selected at the state or county level by the party members.

The democratization of presidential elections eventually took the nominating function away from the conventions. People wanted more direct control over their party's nominees, so the **presidential primaries** came into use (although some states still use caucuses). Party members vote in the primaries to choose whom they want to represent their party in the upcoming election. By the time of the convention, there is no suspense about who will be the nominee -- it has been known for months.

Political conventions serve other purposes beyond nominating the party candidate, which is why they're still around. The convention offers party members a chance to gather together and discuss the party's **platform**. The platform is the party's stance on the political issues of the day. For a long time, the convention was a place for **political debate**, and important decisions were made there. In 1860, the Democratic Party debated the government's right to outlaw slavery. When the party adopted the position that the Supreme Court could decide the slavery issue, delegates from several southern states walked out, resulting in the Southern Democratic Party. In 1980, Senator Edward Kennedy fought against incumbent Jimmy Carter's economic plan. Although Carter defeated Kennedy for the nomination, Kennedy's debate forced Carter to radically change his plan.

Today, even this function of the convention has been largely stripped away. The conventions have been streamlined, with important events and speeches scheduled for prime-time television hours. The parties work to eliminate any evidence of debate or disunity within the party. The political conventions have now been reduced to the status of infomercials, marketing the ideas and personalities of the party to the public. While the conventions serve to unify the party and generate party pride, the "advertisement for the party" has become the primary function of political conventions today.

Now we'll look at who gets to go to the conventions, and what they do there.

Media at the Conventions

The original closed-door caucuses in the early 1800s were mentioned only briefly in newspapers, and only through indirect accounts. As the process became more open, media coverage became more widespread. The often chaotic atmosphere of the conventions was difficult to get across in a printed article, however.

That changed when television arrived. Suddenly, the circus of a national party convention was broadcast into homes around the country. Every floor debate, interruption, protest and delegate squabble was there for public viewing. This gradually led to the changes in the primaries we see today -- no more debates or arguments, no unplanned speeches or interruptions, and protesters are kept miles away from the convention floor. Now, the convention is a media event, attended by almost as many reporters as delegates, and broadcast in carefully selected prime-time viewing slots.

Nuts and Bolts of Political Conventions

The national political conventions are made up of **delegates from each state**. Those delegates are selected in different ways, depending on the party and the state. The key here is that the delegates are not only party members; they are supporters of a particular candidate.

The Democrats use a proportional system, in which the percentage of party members in favor of a candidate in the primary or caucus is reflected in the percentage of delegates representing that candidate who will be sent to the convention. For example, if two candidates split the primary vote, then each gets half of the delegate positions for that state.

Republicans favor a winner-take-all system, although they do allow states the option of using a proportional system. Under a winner-take-all system, the candidate with the majority of votes in the primary or caucus gets all of the state's delegate seats.

Deciding how many delegates each state gets is a very complicated process. Essentially, the number is based on the state's population, as well as how much support that state has given to party candidates in recent elections.

Now we know who gets to go; but how do they decide where they're going? In the age of modern travel and mass communications, the national conventions no longer need to be held in centrally located cities. The main factors today are:

- **Infrastructure** - Does the city have the hotel and convention space, as well as the public transportation, needed to host thousands of people?
- **Security** - Can the site be adequately protected from terrorists or protesters?
- **Funding** - Can the city provide the millions of dollars in additional funding that the parties typically receive from the host city?
- **Preference** - According to Congressional Quarterly, "for the party that controls the White House, often the overriding factor in site selection is the president's personal preference."

What do today's delegates do at the convention? They may discuss party issues, listen to speeches, and participate in party "pep rallies." But for the most part, nothing political actually happens at political conventions in the 21st century. The convention concludes with a carefully planned speech by the party's nominee for president.

Historic Conventions

Perhaps the most infamous political convention was the **1968 Democratic National Convention** in Chicago (see below), but there have been other important events at conventions. In 1888, abolitionist and former slave **Frederick Douglass** became the first black person to receive a vote at a political convention -- a single vote at the Republican convention.

In 1908, Democrats added legislation to their platform that would **separate the interests of corporations from those of Republicans**. They felt that corporations and the Republicans were too closely allied, a theme that remains relevant almost 100 years later.

In 1940, two unique events occurred at political conventions. First, Franklin D. Roosevelt was nominated for a **third term as president**. After some debate over his choice of vice president, he accepted. Second, the Republicans held the first ever televised convention that year.

The 2000 Democratic Convention in Los Angeles was marked by extensive protests in support of numerous causes. Pro-union, gay rights, anti-corporate welfare, pro-environmental and other movements made their voices heard a good distance from the convention site, due to the heavy presence of security fences and police officers. A performance by the politically active rock group **Rage Against the Machine** was interrupted by police, who used pepper spray and fired rubber bullets at fleeing spectators.

In the next section, we'll take a look at how political conventions got started in the first place.

History of Political Conventions

Despite the reluctance of the early leaders of the United States to accept political parties, two had sprung up within a few decades of the country's founding. These initial parties were loosely defined, and it's difficult to pinpoint exactly when they came into being. By the late 1790s, however, the parties were becoming more organized and taking a greater role in American politics.

From 1796 to 1824, candidates for presidential elections were chosen by **congressional caucuses** -- that is, the members of Congress for a given party gathered together and decided whom to nominate for the presidential election. The **electoral college system** was then used to choose the president from among the candidates.

The caucus system began to break down because the American people felt that it **took too much power out of their hands**. In 1816 and 1820, they were right. The **Federalist Party** had collapsed, leaving only one political party -- the **Democratic-Republican Party** (this party is not related in any way to the Democrats and Republicans of today). As a result, whoever was nominated by the Democratic-Republican caucus would be guaranteed to win the presidency. James Monroe won in 1816, and was similarly unopposed in 1820. Americans protested the caucus system around the nation.

That period of **single-party rule** not only led to political conventions, but also created the feeling that a **two-party system** was crucial to American politics. During the transition period, after the death of caucuses but before conventions were instituted, state legislatures nominated presidential candidates.

Ironically, the first political convention was held by a third party, the Anti-Mason Party, in **1831**. Soon after, the National Republicans and the Democrats also began holding conventions. In these early days, the conventions were often held as much as a year prior to the election because transportation was so difficult. For this same reason, they were usually held in centrally located cities. Baltimore held most of the early conventions, while Chicago became the most popular host after the Civil War.

Today, presidential primaries have made the conventions unnecessary for practical purposes. They exist primarily as a marketing tool and a political pep rally, where each party puts on a well-choreographed show.

Answer on notebook paper:

1. What was the original purpose of political conventions?
2. In what ways did the development of presidential primaries change the function of conventions?

3. What are the purposes of political conventions today?
4. What is a party platform?
5. What happened to the role of debate in conventions and why do you think this is the case?
6. How has the role of the media influenced what takes place at conventions?
7. What are delegates?
8. How does the selection of delegates for the Democratic and Republican Party differ?
9. What determines the number of delegates a state receives?
10. How are each Party's convention locations selected?
11. What do convention delegates do at the conventions?
12. Of the historic conventions mentioned, which do you think would have been most interesting to attend and why?
13. Although primaries have made conventions unnecessary for practical reasons, what purposes do they still serve?

Hosting a Political Convention

➤ **Circle your assigned party:**

Republican Party

Democratic Party

1. Decide who in your group will assume the following **roles**:

- **Party Leader** - responsible for keeping the group on track and ensuring everyone contributes to each step
- **Party Secretary** - responsible for writing down ideas discussed in group
- **Candidate** - responsible for presenting party platform via a speech to class
- **Head of Marketing** - responsible for ensuring creation of campaign materials

➤ *Roles only designate which student is in charge of leading the group in getting a particular aspect of the convention done. ALL students are expected to participate and contribute equally to each task below.*



2. What will the Democratic or Republican **platform** focus on this year?

- Within your group, develop a platform for your party. What are the best things about America? What are America's biggest problems? How will your party address the problems and enhance the positive? What are the major issues that bind the members of the Democratic or Republican Party together that your group thinks are most important?
- Refer to what you learned about your party in class (or conduct further research) and select 3 issues to comprise your party's platform. These will represent the issues that your party will prioritize at the Convention. (Examples might include lowering taxes, universal healthcare, prochoice or prolife issues, etc.)
- Remember, political parties use conventions as a way to publicize the party's platform and leaders, so you must determine what the major issues of your platform are and be prepared to get convention attendees motivated and excited about (or about improving) these issues.

3. Prepare an opening day convention **speech** based on the platform you have selected for your party.

- The purpose of your speech is to get convention attendees excited about your party and the issues your party will be tackling if elected to office. The best convention speeches are informative, interesting, inspirational, and memorable.
- To capture and sustain the interest of your audience, you should create and include a slogan (i.e. Candidate Obama's slogan, "Yes we can!") If the other members of your party are to chant this slogan at particular times during the speech, this should be pre-planned as well.
- You might also want to consider using humor, inspirational words, stories that illustrate why your party's issues are important, words of hope and encouragement, etc.
- Your speech should be approximately 3 minutes when delivered.
- While the "Candidate" will be delivering the speech, all group members must help in the creation of the content, as well as help the Candidate practice effective delivery.

4. Develop **campaign materials** for the convention.

- Conventions are typically celebratory, including decorations and materials that feature the party name, party symbols, slogans, candidate names, etc. Sample materials might include banners, posters, pins, hats, t-shirts, mugs, etc.
- Create at least three separate items for display or use during the convention. During the candidate speeches, you will use the campaign items (i.e. wear a pin, hold a campaign sign, etc.)

➤ **The Convention will be hosted on _____ (due date.)**

➤ **What questions do you have about this assignment?**

Name: _____

Notes for Democratic Convention

Candidate Name:	
Issues/Platform	What I liked/What was missing

Candidate Name:	
Issues/Platform	What I liked/What was missing

Candidate Name:	
Issues/Platform	What I liked/What was missing

Candidate Name:	
Issues/Platform	What I liked/What was missing

Name: _____

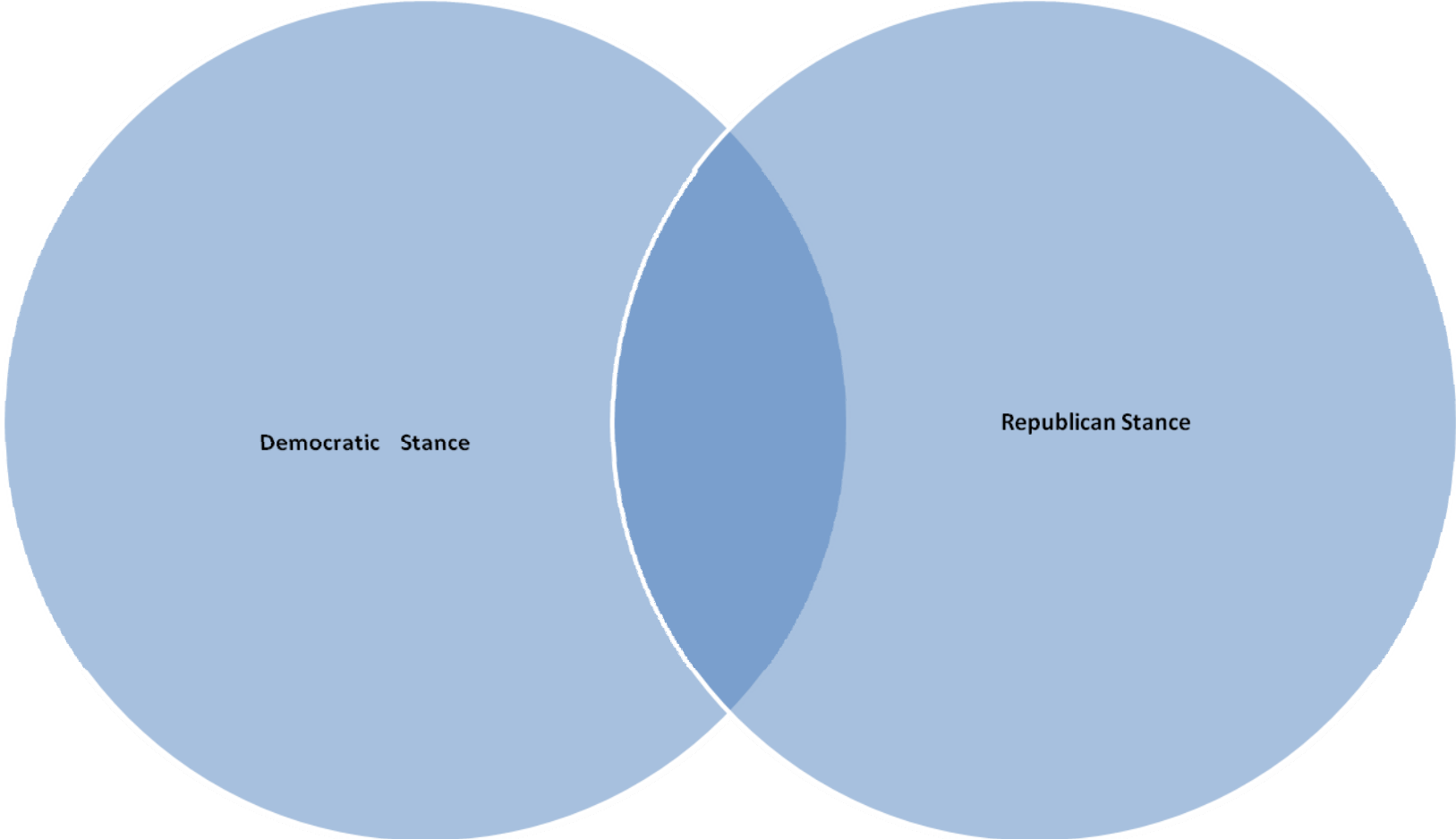
Notes for Republican Convention

Candidate Name:	
Issues/Platform	What I liked/What was missing

Candidate Name:	
Issues/Platform	What I liked/What was missing

Candidate Name:	
Issues/Platform	What I liked/What was missing

Candidate Name:	
Issues/Platform	What I liked/What was missing



Democratic Stance

Republican Stance