

Wednesday, February 15, 2012

The brokered convention nightmare

Can the GOP match the Democrats' historic ineptitude in choosing presidential candidates?

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

Mitt Romney's inability to close the deal on the nomination has led to the potential for an elongated primary process. After strong showings in different states, Rick Santorum, Newt Gingrich and Ron Paul all have reasons to not drop out of the race. With each passing primary, there's actually a chance the Republican nominee will have to deal with the fallout from the first brokered convention since primaries and caucuses became the critical method of choosing nominees.

While nearly every four years there is some talk about a convention fight, it is usually on the other side of the aisle. Throughout the 20th century, Democrats had a lock on embarrassing presidential nomination fights. While the Republicans have had a few memorably bad nomination fights, they have generally been able to quickly and efficiently, and with a minimum of rhetorical bloodshed, settle on their nominee.

The Democrats are famed for botching the selection process. From their earliest days in the Jacksonian era, when they adopted a requirement (since repealed) that a candidate must receive two-thirds of the delegates to win the nomination, the party has caused itself no end of grief. The famed blown conventions are almost all on the Democratic side of the aisle -- whether it was 1968 in Chicago, Ted Kennedy's doomed run in 1980 or the 103 ballots needed to nominate a candidate in 1924.

Even in the best of years for the party, where victory in the general election was almost assured, disaster loomed. Franklin Roosevelt's nomination in 1932 came perilously close to falling apart. In 2008, the party almost entered an embarrassing and potentially devastating convention fight before Hillary Clinton conceded to Barack Obama.

However, rather than being a salve for Republicans, the Obama/Clinton battle may hint at the serious problem the Republicans face. Both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton were young enough and popular enough to see that losing the nomination would not preclude a run in 2012 or 2016. In fact, if she runs in 2016, Clinton could very well be the prohibitive favorite for the nomination. The Republican contenders have a much different picture. All but one of the Republican candidates has no such hope. This election is clearly the last shot for Romney or Gingrich, not to mention the 74-year-old Paul.

While the 53-year-old Rick Santorum may have resurrected his political career with his victory in Iowa, and may have a good reason to be seen as a magnanimous loser, the same can't be said for the other candidates. Romney would be a two-time loser who blew a big lead, setting himself up to be a political punchline; Gingrich, who has been out of elected office for over a decade, will likewise have no future hope to get a presidential nomination. Paul, who is thought not to have a real shot at winning, could have a different motivation. After finally migrating from gadfly to center stage, he may want to use a nomination fight to put his ideological stamp on the party's political positions.

Despite these facts, a brokered convention remains a long shot. Once a clear delegate leader emerges from the pack, the campaign donations flow just to that candidate. The other candidates suddenly lack money, have to deal with bad press and have a heavy party push to get out. Additionally, a number of the later, delegate-rich states are winner-take-all, allowing one candidate to rack up big totals even in close victories.

There hasn't even been a second ballot at a political convention since the Democrats in 1952. The Republicans have a better track record -- they haven't had a second ballot since 1948, and have only had four conventions go past the first ballot since the nineteenth century ended. Even if it does go to a convention without any candidate having a majority, the Republicans would have an unusual advantage over the Democrats -- they need to convince fewer supporters to switch sides. The Republicans have less than half the delegates at their convention than the Democrats -- 2,286 versus 5,555 for the Democrats. In case it is brokered, it should make a deal easier to obtain, as fewer votes have to be switched.

But unlikely doesn't mean impossible. This isn't just a West Wing writer's fantasy -- it is clearly in the realm of the possible. If the delegate count is as close as the Democrats' was in 2008 -- when the party did not even count the Michigan and Florida delegates -- the Republicans might have two or three candidates who have every reason to try and fight to the last. And then, finally, the Republicans will be able to make an equal claim to that mantle of nomination incompetence owned for so long by the Democrats.

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