

Republican National Convention 2016

Party Platform

Introduction

Months of primaries, debates, and campaign events finally culminate for presidential candidates and their respective parties in a National Convention, held every four years for the purpose of determining the presidential ticket and the party's platform. Some of the structural aspects of these conventions differ between the Democratic and Republican parties, but these fundamental goals are the same. The conventions used to receive a significant amount of media attention: from 1956 through 1976, nominating conventions were a spectacle filmed and presented in total on broadcast news. Since the 1980s, coverage of conventions has been condensed, yet they are still one of the times the party as an institution is most visible to the public.

Though the Republican party's nominating process does not include superdelegates, who have more autonomy and, some argue, are less reflective of the democratic process of nominations in the Democratic party, the presidential nominee has rarely been a surprise over the past several decades. The nominating process itself therefore is rarely the focus of attention; rather, the media focuses in on the party's presentation of popular or rising members--especially notable in the keynote address--and its central messages, an offshoot of their decided platform.

The platform itself is of fundamental importance in creating a unified set of priorities for the party and its members, as well as in communicating clearly to the public the party's goals in the hopes of winning votes in the upcoming presidential election year. A party platform is built, playing off the literal meaning of the words, out of planks. A plank is a specific stance taken by the party on an issue; for example, a plank in the 1996 Republican platform was "streamlining government," a broad topic the party planned to address through emphasizing privatization and competition. Some planks are presented in paragraphs, while others may even just be presented in a list of specific policy objectives and topics to tackle. Structurally, planks make up the majority of a party platform, though they are typically preceded by a preamble and followed by a conclusion. Platforms are additionally often explicitly partisan, and the goal of clearly advocating for the party to the public is clear through direct criticism of the other party. This technique may have particular political value when the party does not currently hold the White House, as in the case of the GOP in 1996.

History of the Problem

Past platforms are helpful indicators of shifting party ideology, especially as recorded Republican platforms have existed since 1856. The founders have been invoked by the GOP since its first platform, which referenced deference to Jeffersonian and Washingtonian principles and political justification through the Constitution and Declaration of Independence. Even into the 21st century, ideologically significant historical figures feature prominently in both the preamble and explanations of the policies outlined in the planks. The 2012 GOP platform preamble suggests some continuity and some transformation from the party's start: quoted in it are not only Jefferson and Washington, but Ronald Reagan as well. Ideology and party vision are the primary operating forces in a contemporary platform--though some planks contain specific elaboration on policy goals, overall the platform serves to present to the American people an image of the party, of its chosen presidential and vice presidential candidates, and a distinct set of differences between itself and the opposition.

Party platforms additionally have, in a way not dissimilar to national conventions themselves, acted as a way through which the party can highlight current and rising party leaders. The Platform Committee can contain several high-ranking chairing positions at the broadest level, but also through a group of sub-committees which focus on issues which make up the central structure of the platform. This can be explored through the 2012 Platform Committee--under RNC Chairman Reince Priebus, the three central chairs were each prominent but fairly fresh members of the party: Bob McDonnell, Marsha Blackburn, and John Hoeven, who were at the time a governor, representative, and senator, respectively.

Recent Developments

Approaching the 2016 convention, the GOP has a great deal to consider. Despite recent tension within the party and a tumultuous primary season, the party platform should unify. Parties want to activate their base, but in conjunction with programs initiated by the Republican National Committee following a loss in 2012, the GOP also needs to consider opportunities to expand their coalition. One of the most important developments in this recent party research is the Growth and Opportunity Project, an initiative announced by RNC Chair Reince Priebus in late 2012 and completed in 2013 with recommendations to improve the party's future electoral success. The hundred-page manual addresses topics such as messaging and demographics, campaign finance and interaction with interest groups. Many of the suggestions included as part of the Growth and Opportunity Project, though not explicit policy advice, deal with messaging and the party's central image in a way that could shape the 2016 platform.

The commission and content of the Growth and Opportunity Project are representative of a shifting sociopolitical landscape which the Republican party must be willing to match to achieve continued success. Republican politicians are visible in state and national politics: 31 of 50 states currently have Republican governors, and the party currently holds its strongest majority in both houses of Congress since the first half of the 20th century. However, despite these holdings, the GOP still struggles with messaging. In a 2014 Pew Research Center report, data suggested that the Republican party was perceived by voters as more able in dealing with the issues, including the economy and domestic threats of terrorism. However, the Democrats held a firm advantage in public perception based on party traits--the report found that the public believes the Democratic party governs more ethically and is more willing to embrace bipartisanship, while Republicans are perceived as more extreme and more influenced by special interests. The Growth and Opportunity Project, as well as other Republican initiatives, attempts to address some of these conceptions with the recommendation of a newly formed Growth and Opportunity Inclusion Council, as well as new technology and voting programs. These programs are part of an attempt to address public perception and expand the party coalition, both of which are goals to keep in mind as the 2016 elections near.

Outside of the research of the National Committee, significant changes have occurred in the makeup of the party which might be impactful on the 2016 platform and race. Following John Boehner's October 2015 resignation from the speakership, former vice presidential nominee Paul Ryan became the new Speaker of the House. However, the circumstances of his election within the House--particularly, the inability of the previous frontrunner, Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, to garner the necessary votes within his own party--point toward a deep schism in the party between the Freedom Caucus and Tea Party movement and sections of the party considered either more moderate or more part of a hated institution. In tandem with an election cycle which has yielded

success for outsider and ideologically polarizing candidates, the current political climate within the GOP and of the interactions of both parties will be significant in determining the 2016 platform.

Conclusion

At a National Convention held by each party every four years prior to the presidential election, important party figures and delegates gather for many purposes; among the most important of these is the formation of a party platform. Constructed of planks--specific policies and ideas which are deemed important by the party--the platform is constructed to outline the party's opinion on issues for the public, in the hopes of attracting public support, especially in the upcoming election. The Republican party has experienced some inner division with the advent of ideological subgroups and a surprising election cycle, yet to present an effective platform to the American people, it must determine how to unify disparate groups under a clear Republican message. This will be your task as a member of the 2016 National Convention.

Questions to Consider

- Which issues will be most important to activate the party base for the general election?
- What is the party's central message in 2016? How can the platform be drafted to reflect that?
- How can the GOP use its platform to differentiate itself from the current Democratic administration?
- What techniques can the GOP use to unify party subgroups which are in disagreement?
- How will the party platform be impacted by the presidential nominee? Should the nominee have a significant impact?
- What specific issues should the Republican party emphasize in their 2016 platform?
- With what level of specificity should the GOP's policy goals be outlined?
- Which demographic groups are most important to appeal to for a win in 2016?

Helpful Sources

- List of past party platforms <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/platforms.php>
- Growth and Opportunity Project website: <http://goproject.gop.com/>
- Pew Research Center for US Politics: <http://www.people-press.org/>
- GOP Website: gop.com

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