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LESSONS FROM THE LAST CONVENTION

WHAT THE PUBLIC'S RESPONSE TO THE 2000 REPUBLICAN
CONVENTION SUGGESTS ABOUT THE 2000 DEMOCRATIC
CONVENTION AND CONVENTIONS BEYOND

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A Report of the
Vanishing Voter Project

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Lessons From the Last Convention

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The television audience for the Republican National Convention reached a new low in 2000, as did the amount of over-the-air television convention coverage. Internet coverage was a different story entirely. Thirty-five Internet providers offered nearly continuous coverage directly from the Philadelphia convention site, while hundreds of other web sites provided convention information and news.

Does the Internet represent a brighter future for the party convention? Or does the decline in the television coverage and audience foreshadow an increasingly bleak future? We believe that the second prospect is the more likely.

Since early November, the Vanishing Voter Project has tracked public involvement in the 2000 presidential campaign through weekly national polls of approximately 1,000 adults each. During the GOP convention, our survey focused on the public's response to television and Internet coverage of it. The results suggest that future party conventions, including the Democratic convention this coming week in Los Angeles, will struggle to attract and hold an audience.

A Tale of Three Television Audiences

The broadcast television rating for the 2000 GOP convention was 11.9 points on average. Four years earlier, the Republican convention averaged 16.9 rating points, which was down from 21.3 rating points in 1992.

Television ratings indicate the size of a program's viewing audience. They do not reveal the length of time that individual viewers tuned to the telecast, why they tuned in, or how they responded to what they saw. This information can be obtained through surveys like the one we conducted during the week of the GOP convention. Our survey tells a tale of three television audiences: those viewers who sought out convention coverage (deliberate viewers), those who happened across it while watching television and decided to watch some of it (inadvertent viewers), and those who chose to not to watch the convention at all (non-viewers).

Deliberate Viewers

About half of the survey respondents who watched at least part of the GOP convention on any given night turned on their television sets with the intention of watching all or part of a convention telecast. On average, they watched the convention for a longer period than those viewers who just happened to come across the convention while watching television (see Table 1). Nearly 75% of the deliberate viewers

Table 1: How much of the convention did you watch?

Amount Watched	Inadvertent	Deliberate
A few minutes	50%	14%
Half an hour	32%	12%
An hour	16%	24%
More than an hour	2%	50%

Source: Vanishing Voter Poll, Aug. 1-6, 2000.

watched an hour or more of the evening's convention coverage compared with only 18% of inadvertent viewers.

Not surprisingly, deliberate viewers were disproportionately Republican in orientation. Self-identified Republicans comprised half of all such viewers with the other half split about evenly between self-identified Democrats and Independents.

Age was even more closely associated with deliberate exposure to the convention (see Table 2). Adults who were 65 years-of-age or older were more than six times as likely as those under 30 years-of-age to be deliberate viewers. In fact, only 6% of the younger group were deliberate viewers.

	18-29	30-44	45-64	65+
Deliberate	6%	12%	19%	38%
Inadvertent	24%	19%	17%	20%
Non-viewers	71%	70%	64%	43%

Source: Vanishing Voter Poll, Aug. 1-6, 2000.

Although younger adults have always been less likely to watch the conventions, the disparity has increased in recent elections.¹ Adults who have entered the electorate during the past two decades are less interested in politics than their counterparts of earlier times. As they have become an increasingly larger part of the total electorate, turnout rates and other indicators of campaign participation, including convention viewing, have declined. There is no immediate reason to believe that the next wave of young eligible voters will break the trend, which suggests that the televised convention audience will continue to shrink in size.

Inadvertent Viewers

Each night of the Republican convention, roughly half of the audience consisted of inadvertent viewers—people who sat down at their television set, discovered that the convention was on, and then decided to watch at least part of it. They watched less coverage on average than did the deliberate viewers, but half of the inadvertent viewers claimed to have seen at least a half-hour of coverage.

It might be thought that, as television viewers became more accustomed to seeing the GOP convention on television and hearing about it in the news, inadvertent viewers would decline as a proportion of the convention audience. In fact, the inadvertent audience peaked on the convention's final night, accounting for 57% of the total audience that evening. One reason was the appeal of George W. Bush's acceptance speech. Viewers who happened to see Bush speaking were more inclined to stay tuned than those who tuned in at other points in the convention.

Another reason was that the three major over-the-air networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—provided their most substantial coverage on the convention's final night. The inadvertent audience for any program, including a convention, is partly a function of the number of viewers who happen to encounter the program while watching television. Roughly a fourth of American households do not have cable or satellite television and thus rely on the over-the-air networks for their programs. In addition, most cable viewers include the networks among the channels they routinely monitor. Thus the likelihood that viewers will inadvertently see the convention increases significantly when the over-the-air networks are covering it.

¹ According to the National Election Study, for example, 82% of adults 65 years-of-age and older, compared with 48% of those under 30 years-of-age, watched at least part of the 1984 Republican convention on at least one night. The corresponding figures from the 2000 Vanishing Voter survey are 77% and 39%.

As Table 3 indicates, the broadcast networks are the key to capturing the attention of potential convention viewers. Although deliberate viewers were as likely to watch the convention on cable as on an over-the-air network, inadvertent viewers were three times as likely to watch it on a broadcast network.

	Inadvertent	Deliberate
Major network	66%	40%
Cable news	21%	42%
Both network & cable	8%	14%
PBS / C-Span	5%	4%

Source: Vanishing Voter Poll, Aug. 1-6, 2000.

The three major broadcast networks have cut their convention coverage substantially over the past few elections. From a total of 15 hours in 1992, the GOP convention coverage dropped to 12 hours for both conventions in 1996 and to 8.5 hours this election year. These cuts have contributed to the decline in the convention audience. If the over-the-air networks continue to reduce their coverage, as they have suggested they will do, a further decline in the convention audience can be expected.

Non-Convention Viewers

On the typical night of the GOP convention, about half of the television viewing audience did not, at any time, watch even as little as a minute or two of the coverage. Many of them knew that the convention was being televised — 52% of our survey respondents who were watching television but did not watch the GOP convention said they came across it at some point in the evening.

When viewers who did not watch the convention were asked why, the major reason beyond the customary ones—politics “is boring” or “is meaningless”—was that the convention lacked suspense and excitement.

Their response, too, suggests an uncertain future for the televised convention. The convention has become a showcase for the nominee rather than a deliberative gathering. Given the high probability that nominating races will be decided in the primaries and caucuses, this feature of the modern convention is likely to persist, even though it contributes to declining audience interest.

It should be noted, however, that viewers do not appear greatly troubled by the stylized features of today’s convention. The mini-documentary and other glossy elements of the modern convention, which are a source of consternation to journalists, do not appear to grate on the television audience. When convention viewers were asked what they liked least about the telecast, they mentioned these aspects infrequently. What viewers seem to long for but do not get from the modern convention is a deliberative forum in which issue and candidate differences are debated and resolved.

A Tale of the Missing Audience

The 2000 GOP convention can accurately be described as the first authentic Internet convention. About three dozen Internet outfits provided continuous coverage from Philadelphia and several hundred others offered convention-based information or news. This supply, however, was not matched by a demand for Internet content. Our survey indicates that Americans had almost no interest in experiencing the convention over the Internet.

On the typical convention day, just over one-quarter of the respondents in our Vanishing Voter Project survey claimed to have been on the Internet, but only 34% of these respondents could recall having come across anything about the convention that day on the Internet. When asked how much time they spent on the convention material they encountered, 66% said “just a few seconds”—in other words, only enough time to move on to something else (see Table 4).

Table 4: Time spent paying attention to Convention on the Internet

A few seconds	66%
1 to 5 minutes	13%
6 to 10 minutes	7%
11 to 30 minutes	12%
31 to 60 minutes	3%

Source: Vanishing Voter Poll, Aug. 1-6, 2000.

The vast majority of Internet contacts were inadvertent. When those who had been on the Internet during the past 24 hours were asked whether they had deliberately set out to find material on the GOP convention, only 16% said they had done so. The great majority of them went to a news site. Not a single respondent in our survey claimed to have participated in a convention-dedicated chat group. Only two respondents claimed to have visited a web site dedicated to continuous convention coverage.

When these findings are expressed in terms of all adults—whether they have Internet access or not and whether they were actually on the Internet on a given day or not—the picture is as follows: only 1 in 10 Americans on the typical day saw anything at all on the Internet about the GOP convention; only 1 in 30 spent more than a few seconds looking at Internet-based convention material; only 1 in 63 sought out convention information, and only about 1 in 500 participated in a convention-dedicated site.

Whither the Convention Audience?

The findings reported here suggest an uncertain future for the party convention as an audience-based event. The hardcore convention audience is aging, and the inadvertent audience, though large, will most likely continue to diminish if political interest and network convention coverage decline further — as seems certain for the foreseeable future.

If the televised conventions are to be preserved as a key moment in presidential campaign politics—a time when millions of Americans come together simultaneously to share a common and substantial political experience—changes in policies and attitudes will have to occur. It is not too late to bolster the televised convention, and it would be a mistake to conclude that a declining audience signifies a nearly complete lack of public interest in the televised convention. On each night of the GOP convention, more than 50 million adult Americans watched at least part of the proceedings, and a majority of them watched for a half hour or more.

Moreover, the GOP convention was perceived favorably by those who watched more than just a few minutes of it (see Table 5). Slightly more than a third (35%) of these viewers described the convention as “extremely” or “very” interesting. Another 45% said it was “somewhat” interesting. The proportions that found it “extremely,” “very,” or “somewhat” informative were nearly identical. Although a convention may not contain a lot of information that is new or exciting to the pundits, the average citizen gets his or her first extended exposure to the campaign through convention coverage.

Table 5: What did you think of the convention?

	Interesting	Informative
Extremely	11%	8%
Very	24%	28%
Somewhat	45%	41%
Not too...	12%	13%
Not at all	7%	6%

Source: Vanishing Voter Poll, Aug. 1-6, 2000.

The over-the-air networks have justified their cutbacks in convention coverage by pointing to declining audience ratings and the availability of convention coverage on cable. However, for the moment at least, there is no adequate substitute for extensive broadcast coverage. The size of the inadvertent audience is partly a function of the number of hours of over-the-air convention coverage. Cutbacks in broadcast coverage create a vicious circle: they contribute to a further decline in audience that justifies a further reduction in coverage and so on. The convention audience will continue to shrink unless the networks choose to provide more substantial coverage.

The political parties, too, need to rethink their convention policy. The parties are under the impression—a mistaken one, judging from comparisons of the “bounce” that nominees have received from past conventions²—that even a hint of conflict and disharmony at the convention will undermine the nominee’s chances in the general election. But, as our survey indicates, a carefully orchestrated convention diminishes its audience appeal. In the long term, the parties may have a larger stake in holding onto their convention audiences than in glossing over their internal differences.

The Internet is not, at least in its present form, the answer to the problem of the dwindling convention audience. The motivations that people bring to the Internet are a much more powerful influence than what’s available to them online. There are thousands upon thousands of Internet destinations, and where people go—and how long they stay—is chiefly a function of their interests. Internet exposure is far less haphazard than television exposure. Although viewers often settle for a television program that they have encountered by chance when monitoring channels, Internet users begin their search with a particular destination in mind. Unless they have an interest in politics, they are unlikely to seek out a political site or, if they encounter it, to stay for more than a few seconds.

The real challenge of today’s elections, then, is to stimulate public interest. Most scholarly efforts to enhance the presidential election process have aimed to improve the quality of campaign information. The election is conceived as a time to educate the public about candidates and issues, and the news media and candidates are urged to respond to the opportunity. An abundance of good information, however, is of no consequence if people are unwilling to attend to it. At this moment in American history, citizens—particularly younger ones—are not highly interested in presidential politics and do not follow it very closely.

² See Thomas Holbrook, Do Campaigns Matter? (Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage, 1966).

From the public's perspective, the most substantial argument for strengthening the televised convention is the impact of convention exposure on people's involvement in the campaign and their information about the candidates. The conventions are a time when public interest in the campaign is sparked and when public learning is heightened.

The Vanishing Voter Project has tracked public involvement in the 2000 campaign for nearly nine months. The public's involvement has not built slowly as the campaign has wound its way toward November. Instead, involvement has risen and fallen as key events in the campaign come and go. It is further the case that citizens tend to acquire information about the candidates and issues only during peak involvement periods. The public awareness of Bush and Gore's policy stands actually declined when the campaign went into hibernation after Super Tuesday.

The conventions are a key campaign moment—the key moment—of the summer and early fall. The more substantial the public's involvement in this period, the more substantial their consideration of the issues and the candidates. The televised convention, despite its weakened state, is a critical factor in heightening the campaign involvement of an electorate that is increasingly politically disengaged. A significant number of voters will choose their candidate during the convention period. The quality of these decisions will rest partly on the public's willingness to engage the campaign more fully, which depends partly on the prominence and attractiveness of the televised party convention.

The Vanishing Voter Project has another paper—“Is There a Future for On-the-Air Televised Conventions”—that was prepared and distributed in advance of the Republican National Convention. That paper can be downloaded at the Project's web site: www.vanishingvoter.org.