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Is There a Future for On-the-Air Televised Conventions?

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A Report of the
Vanishing Voter Project

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Is There a Future for On-the-Air Televised Conventions? Panel Discussion Background Paper

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Once the highlight of the presidential campaign, the on-the-air televised convention is teetering on the brink of extinction (see Figure 1). Even as late as 1976, the three major networks provided the viewer with more than 50 hours of convention coverage. By 1996, their broadcasts had shrunk to 12 hours of coverage. A new low will almost certainly be reached in 2000. ABC and CBS are broadcasting only 5 hours of the GOP convention and NBC is limiting its coverage to half that amount. If the Democratic convention receives the same treatment, a viewer of the major on-the-air networks will have access to only 10 hours of convention coverage.¹

The convention audience has also declined, although less dramatically. The 1976 conventions had an average prime-time rating of 28.4 points. By 1996, the average had dropped to 16.9 and is likely to be even lower in 2000. Our recent survey for the Vanishing Voter Project found a sharp decline in Americans' interest in the televised conventions (see Table 1). In a 1996 pre-convention survey, 53% of respondents said they planned to watch most or some of the conventions. In our 2000 survey, only 34% expressed this intention.

Is the end near for the on-the-air televised convention? Would its demise be a serious loss to our public life? If so, can it be saved?

Our panel will address these questions. This paper provides background information for the discussion. It briefly describes factors that have contributed to the decline of on-the-air conventions; it also provides reasons why they might be worth preserving.

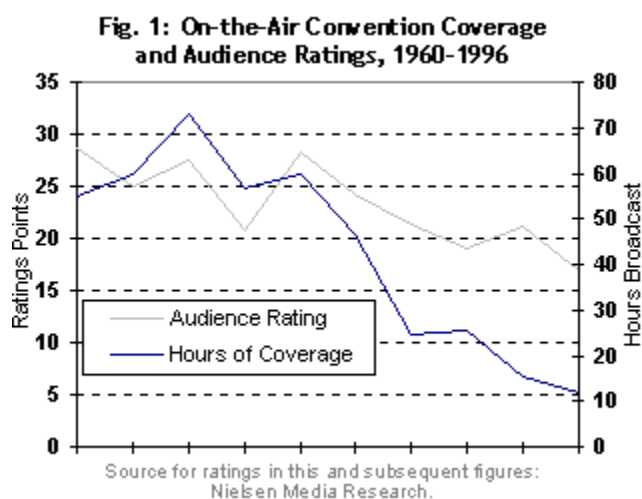


Table 1. How Much of the Conventions Do You Plan to Watch?

	1996	2000
Most/Some	53%	34%
Little/None	47%	66%

Results from identically worded questions:
Yankelovich survey, 1996; Vanishing Voter
survey, 2000.

¹ In this paper, the terms “network,” “networks” and “on-the-air networks” are a reference to ABC, CBS, and NBC only. References to total hours of network coverage are based on the maximum number of hours that an individual viewer could have watched the conventions live on the networks. Thus, if all three networks were broadcasting the same hour of a convention, it would count as a single hour of network coverage. If only one network was broadcasting a particular hour, it also would count as a single hour of coverage.

The Parties and the Decline of the On-the-Air Televised Convention

The party convention no longer has a deliberative role. Since 1972 it has served to ratify decisions made in the primaries and caucuses. Increasingly, it is also a showcase for the nominees and a display of party unity. Both parties in 1996 presented rigidly choreographed conventions that kept any sign of division off the convention floor. This practice will be repeated in 2000.

The parties have reason to be hesitant of an unconstrained convention. Although conflict at a convention makes for good television, it does not always make for good politics. The 1968 Democratic convention—when street protests competed with the podium for the viewer's attention—is a powerful reminder of a convention gone awry. Nevertheless, there is no clear evidence that a modicum of dissent (as opposed to all-out strife) at a convention would hurt the party's general election campaign.² Moreover, there is a price to pay for a highly staged convention: the party loses audience. When we asked respondents in our Vanishing Voter survey why they would not be watching the conventions, the major reason beyond the customary dismissals of election politics—"I'm too busy" and "I'm not interested"—was that the conventions lack suspense and excitement.

The parties have a stake in preserving the on-the-air televised convention. Although the televised debates in the general election are more widely seen as decisive encounters that can decide the election outcome, far more votes are influenced by what happens during the convention period.

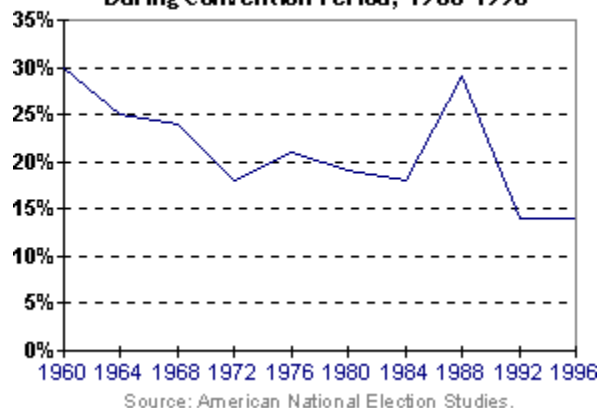
All but two nominees since 1960 (Johnson in 1964 and McGovern in 1972) have received a favorable "bounce" in the polls from their convention. Nominees are able to use the conventions as a time to increase their support. The size of the bounce has varied considerably, however, and the net result has usually made the election more competitive. The nominee who gains the most is typically the one who has been "underperforming"—that is, doing worse in the polls than could be expected given the public's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the performance of the incumbent administration and other such factors.

Conventions offer a nominee in this position (for example, Bush in 1988) an opportunity to gain support among wavering partisans and independents.³

As convention audiences have declined, however, so too has the proportion of voters who make their choice during the conventions (see Figure 2). To the degree that the parties have a stake in solidifying their partisan base—and in an age of weakened partisanship, their stake would seem large—they have a stake in enhancing the appeal of the on-the-air convention.

Over a longer period, the visibility of the national party convention may also be important to the parties' ability to capture the interest of young people. In an earlier age, the on-the-air televised convention was to the parties what the World Series was to baseball. It served to kindle

Fig. 2: Percentage Making Vote Choice During Convention Period, 1960-1996



² See Thomas Holbrook, *Do Campaigns Matter?* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996).

³ See James E. Campbell, Lynne Cherry, and Kenneth Wink, "The Convention Bump," *American Politics Quarterly* 20 (1992): 287-307.

interest in party politics among children and adolescents. It is unlikely that today's conventions have anywhere near the same impact.

The Networks and the Decline of the On-the-Air Televised Convention

The on-the-air networks' stake in maintaining their convention coverage is less obvious. As audiences have declined, extensive live coverage has become increasingly difficult to justify. The networks' reputations as news organizations are perhaps affected by their coverage policies but there is no reliable evidence one way or the other on this point.⁴

An often-heard argument is that the networks have a responsibility to cover the conventions as part of their public-service obligations as broadcast licensees. Although the news value of the conventions has declined, the conventions—like the State of the Union Address—are major public events and deserving of coverage for that reason alone.

Some network representatives have argued that their public service responsibility is obviated by the existence of cable news outlets that willingly provide extensive convention coverage. The implication is that the convention audience has not been substantially affected by cutbacks in network coverage and would not be greatly affected by further cutbacks or even the elimination of on-the-air coverage.

This notion, however, is flawed. For one thing, a fourth of U.S. households do not have cable service or a satellite dish and thus do not have access to these alternative sources of convention coverage. A large number of casual viewers would also be lost if the on-the-air networks chose not to carry the party conventions. The convention audience is made up of those viewers who turn on their television sets with the intention of watching the convention and those viewers who turn on their sets and just happen to catch the convention telecast. The number of viewers in this second category is much larger than might be assumed. In the Vanishing Voter survey that we conducted shortly before the Republican convention, only 19% of respondents knew that it would be held within the next two weeks (see Table 2). Viewers can hardly plan to watch the convention if a substantial number of them do not even know when it is being held. Many of the people who will see the 2000 Republican convention will do so because they happened across it in the act of watching television.

Most cable viewers routinely monitor only a small number of channels, which usually include the broadcast network channels. Thus, the likelihood that a viewer will watch a particular program is in part a function of whether that program is being televised on a preferred channel. If none of the on-the air networks carries the conventions, a large portion of the potential viewing audience would be

Table 2. Do You Know When the Republican Convention Will Be Held?

Asked July 19-23, 2000

Don't know	74%
In one or two weeks	19%
More than a month	6%

⁴ In an earlier period, however, the networks used the conventions as a time to solidify their news reputations and enlarge the profile of their anchors and top correspondents. As audiences continue to fragment, one of the networks might again conclude that the conventions could serve this purpose. As news audiences continue to shrink, a network may decide (following the model of NPR, the only broadcast organization that has an expanding news audience) to target the serious news audience as a means of securing its market share.

lost. We estimate that the total audience would drop by as much as half for this reason alone.⁵

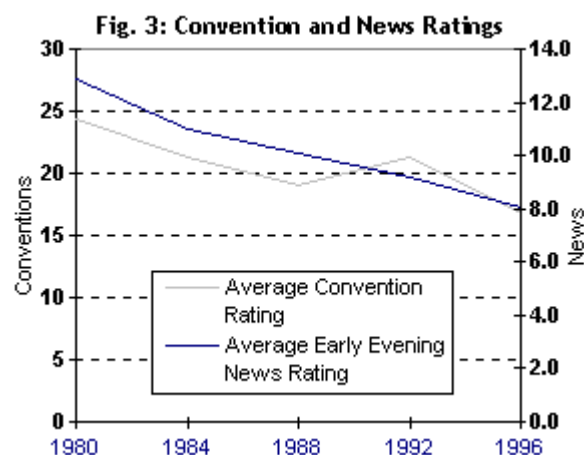
It is the case, moreover, that past cutbacks in on-the-air convention broadcasts have contributed to the decline in the convention audience. Although the networks have justified their cutbacks in terms of declining audience, some cutbacks have taken place after elections in which the audience actually increased or remained stable. Yet cutbacks in every case except 1992 have contributed to a drop in the convention audience in the next election.

The Public and the Decline of the On-the-Air Televised Convention

Voter turnout has declined substantially since 1960, indicating a diminishing public interest in election politics. It is not surprising that convention viewing has also declined during this period and, in fact, there is a close correlation between the two trends.

The correlation between the decline of the convention audience and the decline in the on-the-air networks' evening news audience is even closer. As cable subscriptions increased during the 1980s, the network evening news audience gradually eroded. Before cable, the networks practically had a lock on the 6:30 pm time slot with more than 80% of viewers tuned to the evening news. Today, fewer than 50% of viewers watch the network news at the dinner hour.

As Figure 3 indicates, the relative decline in the convention audience is nearly identical to that of the evening news audience. The significance of this pattern is that it refutes any simple claim that the conventions are particularly unappealing to today's public: in relative terms, the televised conventions are no more and no less appealing to the public than other forms of news and public affairs programming. Any justification for the reduction or elimination of convention coverage that is based purely on audience decline could be applied across the board. If the evening newscasts had been cut as their audiences declined to the same degree as the convention coverage, the network evening newscasts today would be about 6 minutes long.



Why do people watch the conventions? Just as with other forms of public affairs programming, a general interest in politics and public affairs is the primary factor. Convention viewing is also related to partisanship. Republicans are somewhat more likely to watch the GOP convention while Democrats make up a larger share of the Democratic convention audience. And as indicated previously, some of the audience is watching partly because they happened to come across the convention while sitting in front of the television set.

According to our recent Vanishing Voter national survey, the main attraction of today's conventions is the candidates' acceptance speeches (see Table 3). People are drawn to these

⁵ This assessment is based partly on the indirect evidence provided by audience ratings for televised primary election debates during recent elections; the smaller the normal audience rating for an outlet (say, USA versus CNN versus NBC), the smaller the audience rating for the debate.

speeches because they are the one and only realistic opportunity during this age of 10-second soundbites and 30-second ads to listen at length to what the nominees propose to do if elected.

Table 3. Very Interested in Seeing...

Nominee's Acceptance Speech	44%
Roll Call	36%
Nominee's Biographical Film	24%
Interviews with Party Leaders	20%
Journalists' Analysis	14%

The least appealing aspect of convention coverage is the media commentary. Only 14% percent of the respondents in the Vanishing Voter survey indicated that this aspect of convention coverage was of keen interest. The public would like more spontaneity in the convention coverage, but they do not seek it from journalists. As Table 3 shows, they actually would rather watch the nominees' canned documentaries than listen to journalists' analysis.

From the public's perspective, the most substantial argument for strengthening the on-the-air 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 through weekly national surveys since early November. The public's involvement does not build slowly as the campaign winds its way to November. Instead, involvement rises and falls as key events in the campaign come and go (see Figure 4). It is further the case that citizens tend to acquire information about the candidates and issues only during peak involvement periods. The public's 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 on-the-air 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 of the on-the-air convention coverage.

Whether the on-the-air televised convention can be revitalized is an open question. The answer may depend on the willingness of the parties and the networks to accommodate each other's needs. One idea that has been suggested is for the parties to shorten the conventions to two evenings, which the networks would then cover gavel-to-gavel. Whether this or some other alternative has support within both the parties and the networks is among the topics that our panel can be expected to explore.

Fig. 4: Public Involvement in 2000 Campaign

