Americans are enduring two weeks of political conventions with speechifying cheering, waving, interviews and smiles. It is an old-time political event, a gathering designed for the people present rather than the larger TV viewership or an Internet audience. For decades, news people have lamented that the convention is just not made for television, and that the parties' efforts to jazz it up simply emphasize how far it falls short.

So, when and why did political conventions originate? The first political convention was held in 1831 by the small Anti-Mason Party, followed by the National Republican Party (no relation to the modern Republican Party). The Democratic Party held its first convention in 1832.

While the stated purpose of the events was to nominate each party’s presidential candidate, that was just a formality for the National Republican and the Democratic parties; their candidate choice was known well before the meeting, with the National Republicans nominating Henry Clay and the Democrats choosing the sitting president Andrew Jackson.

The real reason for these conventions was to rally the voters behind the party and generate enthusiasm for its candidate for president. They needed their members and supporters to go out into the rest of the country to persuade people to vote for their candidate.

To accomplish this, conventions took on the form that we still see today. It is a form that had its origins in religious revivals and the extended camp meetings that had been taking place since the late 1700s.

Camp meetings were held in rural areas and, since the assembled participants had usually traveled a day or more to reach the meeting, they had to camp for its duration.

The activities consisted largely of non-stop preaching, with ministers from different denominations often giving hours-long sermons one right after another. These were interspersed with frequent hymn singing and calls for conversion.

The sermons set a revival’s tone and the crowd responded. Over days, the religious emotion heightened, with increasing numbers redirecting or recommitting their lives to God and Christianity.

The preachers tended to follow a similar set of themes. They helped their listeners to imagine what their future would be like without God and then what it could like with God, especially with regard to eternal life in heaven after death. As crowd members talked among themselves, this message was reinforced. Sometimes, there were testimonies from the crowd itself. More and more people believed the message and then took action and dedicated their lives to walk with Christ.

These three steps of imagination of the future, belief in the Christian message, and dedication of one’s life were repeated over and over again from evangelizing gathering to camp meeting to revival session.

These were nearly always capped with the admonishment for those enthused by the gathering to go out into the world and win new disciples for Christ. They should continue working to win souls among those who had not attended the revival.

Political conventions have followed this model of the revival meetings. They bring together people from far away and entertain them with large amounts of speechifying, drawing upon speakers from many walks of life and regions of the country.

These orators talk about the future, getting their listeners to imagine how their lives will be improved if their candidate wins the election and how bad it will be if the other guy wins. Across the speeches, the audience comes to believe that their future is best served by the chosen leader and that he or she can win the White House.

By the end of the convention, the participants commit themselves to getting their candidate elected. They leave with a dedication to achieving this goal and with the aim of persuading others to vote for their candidate.

Political conventions thus work through the same three stages found in revivals: imagining future possibilities, believing in their shared choice, and dedicating themselves to supporting their candidate. After the meeting is over, they are expected to go out and win over others to their position and vote for their nominee.

Thus the thoroughly secular political conventions organize, enthuse and excite their members through the same strategies used in religious revivals. These techniques may be centuries old, but television and the Internet cannot substitute for face-to-face interaction. The social power of a crowd cheering for a shared goal remains a powerful force.

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