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Civics 101

Episode: Presidential Nominating Conventions Short

Nick Capodice: [00:00:02] This is Nick.

Hannah McCarthy: [00:00:03] And Hannah McCarthy.

Nick Capodice: [00:00:05] Presidential conventions are the party of the century.

Hannah McCarthy: [00:00:09] More like the party of every four years.

Nick Capodice: [00:00:12] That doesn't have quite the same ring to it. Either way, nominating conventions are full of razzle-dazzle and drama.

Hannah McCarthy: [00:00:19] You have an exclusive invitation to listen.

Nick Capodice: [00:00:22] This civic short on presidential conventions is designed with middle schoolers in mind, but it's also for anyone who wants a quick refresher.

Archival Tape: [00:00:30] Chicago is a city divided as thousands of delegates and observers stream into the city for the twenty-fifth Republican convention.

Archival Tape: [00:00:38] This is going to be the craziest convention I ever saw.

Archival Tape: [00:00:41] Someone has been hurt and is being carried out, being wheeled out on a stretcher.

Archival Tape: [00:00:48] `Will the sergeant at arms enforce order in the convention?!

Felix Poon: [00:00:53] Those are clips from the pinnacle of American politics

Jacqui Fulton: [00:00:55] The Democratic National Convention, DNC, and the Republican [00:01:00] National Convention, RNC.

Felix Poon: [00:01:02] As you can hear, they get lively.

Jacqui Fulton: [00:01:05] There have been smoke-filled rooms, bribery, protests.

Felix Poon: [00:01:07] And somewhere in the midst of all that work has to be done.

Jacqui Fulton: [00:01:13] I'm Jacqui.

Felix Poon: [00:01:14] I'm Felix.

Jacqui Fulton: [00:01:15] Break out your party hats.

Felix Poon: [00:01:18] Today on civic shorts, we are going to throw down the what, where and why of the presidential nominating conventions.

Archival Tape: [00:01:26] The curtain is about to rise on one of the most momentous meetings in Republican history. And spectators crowd around convention hall. Twelve hundred and six delegates are gathered to hear General MacArthur deliver the keynote address.

Felix Poon: [00:01:43] What are conventions?

Jacqui Fulton: [00:01:44] Party conventions take place every four years, typically a few months before Election Day.

Felix Poon: [00:01:50] Conventions are a transition during presidential campaigns.

Jacqui Fulton: [00:01:54] They mark the shift from the nominating process to the general election.

Felix Poon: [00:02:00] The [00:02:00] presidential conventions have two big functions.

Archival Tape: [00:02:04] One.

Jacqui Fulton: [00:02:05] They're used to select party candidates.

Archival Tape: [00:02:08] Two

Felix Poon: [00:02:09] They also help a party perfect its platform. More about that in a minute.

Felix Poon: [00:02:16] Where do they take place?

Jacqui Fulton: [00:02:16] Like the Super Bowl conventions are held in different cities, often in places where the party is hoping to woo voters. Way back when they were held in churches, meeting halls and even saloons.

Felix Poon: [00:02:32] This year, will be the first-ever virtual presidential convention.

Archival Tape: [00:02:37] The DNC announcing this year's national convention in August will be largely virtual, amid the pandemic. Delegates were asked to stay home and cast their votes remotely.

Felix Poon: [00:02:49] Who goes to presidential conventions?

Jacqui Fulton: [00:02:52] Everybody who's anybody in politics attends the conventions.

Archival Tape: [00:02:54] While the figures of Taft and Eisenhower dominate the convention atmosphere, [00:03:00] elder statesman, Herbert Hoover, only living ex-president, will be heard before the assembly.

Felix Poon: [00:03:08] In 2008, around 84000 people attended the last day of the DNC.

Jacqui Fulton: [00:03:13] I hate to be one of those lines to the bathroom.

Felix Poon: [00:03:16] The majority of folks are volunteers, activists, news media, invited guests and party officials.

Jacqui Fulton: [00:03:22] But the important attendees are the delegates.

Archival Tape: [00:03:24] delegates.

Archival Tape: [00:03:25] Delegates.

Felix Poon: [00:03:26] Delegates are people who have been chosen to represent their states at the convention. Often their local political leaders, each state picks their own delegates.

Jacqui Fulton: [00:03:35] The amount of delegates the party has is based on a few different things. Each party has their own special formula.

Archival Tape: [00:03:42] Nearly two thirds 271 captured anywhere from four to seven delegates, depending on the remaining. One hundred forty four pledged delegates are distributed based on it,

Jacqui Fulton: [00:03:52] Which is why they have different numbers of delegates.

Felix Poon: [00:03:56] Why are conventions important? What happens at a convention?

Archival Tape: [00:04:00] One [00:04:00] on one half for the minority or for 30 and a half for the administration.

Jacqui Fulton: [00:04:05] The first order of business at a convention is to perfect their platform.

Felix Poon: [00:04:10] Parties of people who don't all see eye to eye. The convention allows them to work out exactly where they stand on issues while they are all in one place.

Jacqui Fulton: [00:04:19] This is called the platform. It gives the party clear political positions to stand on. The delegates debate and vote on every single word in the platform. It looks exhausting.

Archival Tape: [00:04:31] So the amendment you have before you strikes a number of words that are struck, striking there in red. You know, it isn't some Martians that are telling us that we should accept the new normal. It's the pundits and the Democrats. This will be the first page of actual content in our platform. I think it's important that we keep voters attention and not turn them off with some sour language. The amendment is adopted.

Felix Poon: [00:04:56] Second, and this one's a biggie.

Jacqui Fulton: [00:04:58] Conventions are where political [00:05:00] parties pick their presidential candidate.

Felix Poon: [00:05:03] Presidential campaigns start years in advance of actual election day by the time of the convention. Many candidates have been weeded out and it's down to only a handful of candidates.

Archival Tape: [00:05:14] General Ike is the first chief contender to arrive on the convention scene with Mrs. Eisenhower. And here comes Mr. Republican himself, Senator Robert Taft, the son of a former president. Confident of victory he claims five hundred and four delegates assured.

Jacqui Fulton: [00:05:30] This is where the delegates from each state cast their vote for candidates. Back in the day conventions were run by party bosses.

Felix Poon: [00:05:37] Kind of like mobsters.

Jacqui Fulton: [00:05:39] They would buy votes from the delegates.

Felix Poon: [00:05:41] You vote for my guy and I'll give you five dollars and a box of cigars kind of deal. Ballots were rigged, all kinds of shadiness

Archival Tape: [00:05:49] Gov. William Scranton and his backers attempted a floor fight over the seating of a Negro delegate from Tennessee.

Felix Poon: [00:05:56] It was a struggle to get diverse delegates at the nominating conventions.

Archival Tape: [00:06:01] The [00:06:00] Massachusetts delegation to the Democratic National Convention. People in the delegation properly represent women, young people and minorities. Three group the Democratic Party said had to be involved in the collection of this years presidential nominee.

Jacqui Fulton: [00:06:15] Rules were implemented to take power away from the corrupt party bosses. It made the nominees shoo-ins before the convention start.

Archival Tape: [00:06:25] Mr. Chairman, delegates and my fellow citizens, I proudly accept your nomination.

Jacqui Fulton: [00:06:32] So conventions are now largely a ceremonial spectacle.

Felix Poon: [00:06:36] Flashy affairs full of pomp and circumstance to get voters pumped up for the November presidential election.

Jacqui Fulton: [00:06:43] Released the confetti and let's get this party started!

Archival Tape: [00:06:47] Thank you for helping us have the best national convention we've ever had!

Nick Capodice: [00:06:57] Voila, there you have it, Hannah, presidential nominating [00:07:00] conventions.



Hannah McCarthy: [00:07:01] Nowadays, they serve two big functions. One, they helped to nail down a party platform. And two delegates officially pick the party's candidate for president.

Nick Capodice: [00:07:12] Cue the credits!

Credits kid: [00:07:14] This episode was produced by Jacqui Fulton. With help by Nick Capodice. Hannah McCarthy. Felix Poon. Christina Phillips. Erika Janik. Maureen McMurray. Music in this episode by Blue Dot Sessions.