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A Comparative Case Study of Georgia Delegations At The 2012 National Party Conventions

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Introduction

From August 26 to September 8, nine political science students and four supervising faculty traveled from Kennesaw State University to the 2012 Republican National Convention and the Democratic National Convention as part of special topics course on a course titled “Party Conventions Field Study”. While in Tampa and Charlotte, the students and faculty immersed themselves in a “real world” educational environment and in doing so gained extraordinary first-hand exposure to a fundamental, yet not well understood, part of the American political process. Students directly engaged with convention proceedings and participants, primarily the Georgia state party delegations, and implemented pre-approved research projects. Nine communication students also traveled to the conventions where they interviewed delegates and party officials and filed daily stories that were published on the department’s news website¹.

This educational and research opportunity was the result of collaborative planning on the part of faculty from the Department of Political Science and International Affairs and the Department of Communication. The fact that both of the party conventions were being held in locations less than one day’s drive from Kennesaw State campus offered the possibility of designing such a field experience for undergraduate students. Participation in convention activities was facilitated by the state party organizations, in particular the Georgia Republican Chair Sue Everhart and Georgia Democratic Chair Mike Berlon.

Each student enrolled in the political science course was assigned to research in one of three general topic areas. Under faculty supervision, students engaged in survey research, semi-structured qualitative interviewing, document analysis, and field observation. Projects were collaborative in that a student researcher who traveled to the DNC was paired with one who

¹ www.KSUNewsNow.com

traveled to the RNC. This approach allowed for a comparative case study analytical approach as data from both conventions were pooled and delegations analyzed against each other on common terms.

In this article, we review existing academic scholarship on convention delegates, summarize some of the students' research findings and field experiences, and discuss broader conclusions and implications for the study of party conventions and Georgia state politics. Results presented are based on two research projects that explored "the delegate experience", focusing primarily on the Georgia delegates in terms of their backgrounds, motivations for and perspectives on serving as delegates, issue and value priorities, and reflections on the parties and presidential candidates.

Literature Review

Scholars have been studying the characteristics and attitudes of convention delegates throughout the modern era of party conventions (since 1968). They have looked at ideology, party loyalty, demographics and other personal and political characteristics of delegates while employing a variety of data-gathering methods.

In their 1975 longitudinal study, Soule and McGrath (1975) set out to compare socioeconomic status and ideological and stylistic preferences among delegates to the national Democratic Party conventions in 1968 and 1972. Using personal interviews and a small Likert-type survey, Soule and McGrath (1975) gathered data measuring these preferences from 188 delegates in 1968 and 314 delegates in 1972. Respondents were also asked to provide demographic data. Though Soule and McGrath (1975) conceded that direct comparison was difficult given the marked differences in primary issues and public opinion between the two years, they did make some interesting discoveries. First, in 1972, numbers of young people, women, and blacks were substantially higher than in 1968. Second, liberal tendencies among Democratic delegates increased dramatically. And, finally, the preference for “amateurs” (those who participate in politics for intangible, abstract reasons, as opposed to semiprofessionals and professionals) rose significantly between 1968 and 1972.

King and Gleiber (1987) compared the Democratic and Republican delegations from Tennessee to their respective national conventions in 1984. Though the two delegations were on the surface quite similar, the approaches adopted by each convention were remarkably different. The Democrats chose to focus solely on decision making, while the Republicans used their state delegations to push the Republican agenda at home and to solidify delegate support for the party presidential ticket. Additionally, King and Gleiber (1987) noted that Democratic delegates were much more likely to spend time away from the big convention hall and in smaller meetings or caucuses, persuading other delegates to vote this way or that on a particular issue or candidate, while Republicans stuck more or less to the hall and were required to voice an opinion only once – to reaffirm support for the Reagan-Bush ticket.

Carlson and Burrell (1987) investigated differences between Hart and Mondale supporters at the 1984 Connecticut State Democratic Convention. At the time, the Democratic Party was experiencing significant cleavages; Carlson and Burrell (1987) set out to determine whether delegate differences were responsible for these cleavages by comparing social characteristics, ideology, and attitudes with regard to the Democratic Party. Four hundred eighteen delegates indicated they supported Hart or Mondale (48.6% and 51.4%, respectively). The two groups reported the largest number of respondents for the following categories: Gender (male), age (41-50), residence (Suburban), years lived in state (31+), education (post-graduate), occupation (professional), and religion (Catholic). The two groups also turned in almost identical numbers

regarding positions on major convention issues, such as legalization of marijuana and the adoption of the Equal Rights amendment to the Constitution. Carlson and Burrell (1987) concluded that intraparty cleavages were not the greatest challenge to the Democrats; revising their strategy to gain popular support was.

Carlson and Martin (1987) surveyed a total of 36 delegates to the 1984 Democratic and Republican National Conventions to investigate conceptions of representation. Four conceptions emerged: “the ‘trustee,’ the belief that group interests should be represented, the belief that representation is a matter of the representative’s conscience, and the ‘delegate-servant’” (Carlson & Martin, 1987, p. 355). The study revealed three unexpected findings: 1) A majority of those surveyed rejected the idea of party leaders, 2) no respondent felt that he or she was representative of the party as a whole, and 3) no respondent referenced the need for a candidate to represent the entire nation – unusual, as it is common for political leaders to see themselves as leaders of “the people.”

Carsey, Green, Herrera, and Layman (2006) inspected the norms of party activists’ decision-making behavior with a survey of delegates to the Democratic and Republican National Conventions of 2000. The authors were especially interested in the “balance between ideological purity and pragmatic pursuit of electoral success” (Carsey, Green, Herrera, & Layman, 2006, p. 247). The authors focused on certain state contextual factors, such as the rules for selecting delegates, political culture within the state, polarization within the party, and the financial health of the parties. The study was inconclusive, as some decision-making norms were associated as expected with some of these factors, while others were not; however, there were some important findings. First, the greater a state party’s financial health, the more likely it is to send pragmatic (as opposed to purist) delegates to the national convention, and second, the greater the pressure applied to win, the more likely delegates are to sacrifice ideological purity in favor of success at the polls.

While the studies summarized above are helpful in illuminating various characteristics of party convention delegates, we are left with a surprisingly limited academic understanding of those who directly participate in these quadrennial exercises in American electoral democracy. The gap in the literature, which our study seeks to fill, is especially obvious given recent trends toward increased citizen engagement in other facets of American politics (Paulson 2009; Karpowitz et al. 2011) and calls for reform of the presidential nomination process (Mayer 2009; Atkeson and Maestas 2009).

Methodology

Findings presented in this article are based on survey research, interviews, and qualitative field research conducted by student research teams at the 2012 national political party conventions². All data and results are specific to the Georgia state party delegations. One research team distributed a 19 item survey, comprised of closed-ended and open-ended items, which gathered demographic data and information on the delegates' service, their political experience and involvement, ideological orientation, issue priorities, and perceptions of the parties and the delegate selection process. Their convenience sample was comprised in total of 36 completed interviews at the Republican National Convention researcher and 60 completed interviews at the Democratic National Convention. The other research team rooted its study in qualitative data in the form of a dozen open-ended interview questions relating to the delegates' service and the selection process, their values and issue priorities, and attitudes about the political parties, the election, and presidential candidates. Data were collected from 30 delegates in total, evenly divided between the DNC and RNC. Students also provided research notes on each completed case.

Findings

Who are the Delegates, Why Do They Serve, and Perceptions of the Selection Process

Our research uncovered several interesting differences between the Georgia delegations at the 2012 Democratic and Republican conventions. In particular, the GOP delegates were more likely to be white, middle aged (30-49), and overwhelmingly from the business world. Democratic delegates, on the other hand, were more racially diverse, older (50 years old and up), and came from more varied occupational backgrounds, including a sizeable number who were educators or retired. The direct correlation between race and party affiliation was not necessarily surprising given the parties' dominant bases of popular support in the south. It is also important to note that the Democratic convention group was the result of the party's delegate selection process which requires the racial composition of the delegation reflect the popular vote tally from the previous presidential election contest.

The party delegations also differed in terms of length of service and political experience. The vast majority of Republicans reported having been involved with the party for less than ten years. Less than one-third currently serve in an official capacity with the party, and only one in ten said they have run for or serve in political office. On the other hand, one third of Democratic conventioners report they have been involved with the party more than twenty years, two-thirds currently serve in an official capacity with the party, and forty percent have run for or serve in political office.

² The students who participated on the research teams were Ernesto Ausejo, Kyle Chappell, Charles Duvall, and Carole Nanguy.

Both sets of researchers focused on “the delegate experience.” As such, in order to explore factors that motivated these 2012 conventioners from Georgia to become involved in politics in the first place, we sorted open-ended responses to the “why are you a delegate” question into the following four categories based on the nature of motivating factor expressed: party-based, ideological or issue based, citizenship based, personal or professional based. Several interesting distinctions between Democrats and Republicans emerge. First, GOP delegates were far more likely to reference party-related factors for serving. Comments such as “I became involved to help promote our party and regain the White House,” “to better move my party forward,” and “promote Republican ideals” were common. Democrats, on the other hand, were more likely to identify citizenship-related factors. Comments such as “I really wanted to get involved and become a part of the process,” and “need to serve” were prevalent. Only a small number of delegates in either party referenced personal or professional reasons for serving.

The interview guide also invited conventioners to reflect on the delegate selection process at the state and national levels. Attitudes were generally positive across the board. Comments such as “reasonable,” “fair,” and “efficient” were typical. The few criticisms differed somewhat based on party. While Republicans expressed concerns about the “lengthy,” “complicated,” and “confusing” process, Democrats were likely to call for more organization. There was also some commonality as one GOP participant recommended more formalized rules be put in place regarding years of service to the party before qualifying as a delegate and one Democrat called for a clearer set of criteria to determine exactly who is eligible to serve.

Ideology, Issue Priorities, and Attitudes about Parties and Candidates

Key differences emerged in terms of the delegates’ ideological orientation and issue priorities. Republican delegates, by and large, were ideologically motivated. Specifically, on a ten-point scale with one representing extremely conservative and ten representing extremely liberal, GOP delegates rated on average of 8.63 while Democratic delegates scored on average 4.4. Thirty-seven percent of the Georgia GOP rated themselves a 10 and another 27 percent scored a 9 while only nine percent of the Georgia Democrats rated themselves a 1 and four percent scored a 2. In summary, Republican delegates were far more likely to identify themselves as extremely conservative than Democratic delegates were to rate themselves extremely liberal.

Moreover, we discovered key distinctions between the two parties on their issue priorities. Republican delegates were more likely to identify jobs and economic issues as the number one issue of the presidential election, which reflects the heavy preponderance of GOP delegates from the world of business. Tampa group was most focused on the issue of tax reduction and concerned with the national debt and the long term consequences associated with rising debt. Democrats, on the other hand, tended to be more interested in economic equality and the overall fairness of the United States economic system. Overall, our research suggests that members from both parties hope to accomplish similar goals but promote different solutions to a similar set of

national problems. Several student researchers noted that this overall finding mirrors the core policies of the two major parties and is consistent with their expectations for delegate attitudes at the two conventions.

Survey results also reveal a preference among Republican delegates for fiscal responsibility, which surfaced in many of their survey responses and in discussions with delegates at party activities. At the Republican National Convention, we discovered that the delegates were most supportive of reducing the national debt. These issue opinions are clearly linked to values typically associated within the Republican Party and reflected in survey responses. Fiscal responsibility and reducing the national debt were a major focus for Mitt Romney's campaign for President. At the Democratic National Convention, we discovered that the predominant and overarching value of the Democratic delegates was a sense that the economic system in America was not benefitting the masses. Many of the delegates believed that the President was trying to restore the fairness in the system. The delegates would often bring up studies that show the deterioration of the middle class in America and expressed concern that America was missing a sense of equality. Not only were they concerned with economic equality but they were also focused on racial and marriage equality. There is an underlying principle that is shared by many delegates; making sure every man, woman and child is treated fairly and equally under the law. No one certain group should be privileged in our nation, we are all citizens under one flag and public policy should always reflect such.

The Republican delegates expressed more solidarity with the values and attitudes of the national party than did the Democrats. Republicans have a governing majority in Georgia, and are therefore more likely to approve of the policies of the national Republican Party. On the other hand, the delegates were equally as enthusiastic about their respective party nominees. Republicans expressed admiration for Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan and believed the ticket had a great chance of winning, as did the Democrats for Barack Obama and Joe Biden. In fact, Republicans and Democrats were roughly equal on this score. While it is natural for delegates to be supportive of their candidates, this finding may be somewhat surprising given that a majority of the Georgia Republican delegates were originally pledged to Newt Gingrich. At the same time, that the surveys collected at the Republican National Convention might not have included any interviews from Ron Paul delegates, or supporters from various states at the convention other than Georgia.

Delegates from both parties were also enthusiastic about the election prospects in November. All 31 respondents were confident in their respective candidate winning the general election in November. Some delegates mentioned that it would be a close election; however, in the end their nominee would win the presidential contest in 2012. It makes sense that the delegates were enthusiastic about the election prospects in November since the convention is an exciting, motivating experience for the delegates.

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The Convention Experience

The experience of the Tampa students differed from that of the Charlotte students in the amount of access they had to convention activities. By and large, students reported that it was easier to find delegates that were willing participants at the Democratic Convention than at the Republican Convention. It seems that the students at the RNC in Tampa had fewer points of access to delegates and elected officials than was the case in Charlotte. For example, the students in Tampa were able to attend only one delegate meeting at the hotel where the Republican Party of Georgia was staying. In Charlotte, on the other hand, students and faculty were invited to join the Democratic Party of Georgia at their daily breakfasts at the delegation hotel which served as fertile ground for polling and interviewing delegates. Moreover, the overall number of delegates at the Republican convention was smaller than the Democratic convention, leaving a smaller pool of individuals to study.

For the Tampa convention, our group had access to four credentialed passes for each day. Because of Hurricane Isaac, Monday's convention activities were canceled, leaving eight students to share four passes for three nights. Nonetheless, all of the students at both conventions reported very fulfilling, exciting educational experiences. For many of them it was their first time attending an organized national party event. For students in political science, it was an opportunity to spend time with participants and activists that they tend to agree with on some level. It was also an opportunity to interact with elected officials and party officials that they follow through the media.

Conclusions

The national party conventions provided a hands-on opportunity for students to interact with delegates and examine up close how the delegates view their roles and conduct their business. Through student interviews and informal discussion with delegates, the knowledge base of students expanded dramatically, and some interesting comparisons emerged between the Republican and Democratic Party experiences.

Both the delegates of the Democratic and Republican conventions were very enthusiastic about their party's prospects in November. Student interviews with delegates at both conventions found high levels of confidence that their candidate would prevail in November. One of the key differences in delegates at the two conventions was their professional orientation and experience. At the Republican convention, for example, delegates were overwhelmingly from the private sector. Democratic delegates, by contrast, consisted of more of a mix of private sector, state and local government employees, and political professionals. Then there were the racial and ethnic differences. Republican delegates were over 90 percent white. Democratic delegates were much more diverse, reflecting the more diverse electorate identifying with the Democratic Party.

Other key differences emerge over party philosophy and issue priorities. Republican delegates were much more focused on economic issues, and identified tax reduction as a major political goal. Democratic delegates, on the other hand were not as focused on the economy, but did consider economic equality to be of major importance. On the issue of taxes, for example, Democrats found tax fairness to be more important than tax reductions.

The Georgia Republican delegates were more comfortable with their national party's political orientation than were the Georgia Democrats. Several student researchers speculated that this was due to there being a Republican majority in Georgia state government and, therefore, more of a direct alignment with state and national party identities and goals. Again, Republican delegates were more likely to identify themselves as "very conservative" compared to a smaller percentage of Democratic delegates who identified themselves as "very liberal."

It is important to note that the exercise of researching delegates differed between the two conventions as well. In general, it was easier to find delegates willing to be interviewed at the Democratic convention in Charlotte than at the GOP convention in Tampa. This was partly due to access. Students in Charlotte were able to attend more delegate meetings and functions than was the case in Tampa. Another factor may have been the occupational makeup of the Democratic delegates – more were likely to have experience in politics and government, and therefore more familiar with the aims of the research.

In the end, the research teams proclaimed the so-called delegate experience "alive and well" in both of the political conventions. The delegates seemed to always be having a great time in both Tampa and Charlotte. They enjoyed attending the private forums and events and morning breakfast with very important political figures. Both of the state party organizations obviously wanted to make their delegates enjoy their time as much as possible; after all these delegates were there to vote on party platforms, and they needed them to be happy for such contentious votes.

To a person, the students reported having very positive experiences at the conventions and relished the opportunity to play a role at a major national event. To some, it reinforced the importance of staying active in a democracy. All of them reported having learned a great deal about how political conventions work and about the importance of party leadership. Most said they would like the opportunity to attend future national conventions, possibly as delegates themselves.

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