

John Kerry's Convention

Boston, July 30. Time to recap the convention—what happened, what did not happen. Let's start with the event itself. Thousands of people came to Boston for the last week in July: about 5000 delegates and alternates; about 15,000 journalists; thousands of hangers-on, in Beantown for the parties; and thousands of protestors, though fewer than many predicted.

Thousands of other people left Boston—virtually every Bostonian who had anywhere else to go. For months they had listened to dire predictions about the traffic, about the threat of terrorists, about protestors who would make normal life impossible. So they fled. And the result? No traffic. Walk-ins welcomed at the best restaurants, for which one normally needs reservations months in advance. State troopers—omnipresent throughout the week—became friends of the convention-goers, protecting them to be sure, but mostly sharing a new view of Boston as a city without hassles, welcoming to everyone. In short, it was a great time for those coming to Boston, an opportunity missed for those who left.

But what about the convention itself? Look back at our section in chapter 8 on the conventions, pages 319-330. Officially every one of the things we discuss happened: credentials were approved, rules were adopted, the platform was drafted and presented, and the vice presidential candidate was selected. Did those of you who saw the convention witness any of those things? I think not. I watched hour upon hour of convention coverage on C-SPAN, when I was not there myself. I did not see the report of the Credentials Committee nor that of the Rules Committee. There were no disputes. The Platform Committee adopted an extremely short document, designed mostly to ruffle no feathers. It was discussed hardly at all. There was no dissent; there were no amendments. The vice presidential candidate was tapped weeks before the convention. Kerry-Edwards signs were everywhere from Monday on.

Let me tell one story. I have attended four previous conventions. Since 1960, when Robert F. Kennedy organized the convention floor for his brother's nomination campaign, state delegations have been quite well organized. The leadership sets up a whip system so they know who is on the floor and so the delegates know how they are to vote. In 1980, for instance, there was a significant fight over the Rules Committee report. The whips for the Carter campaign told their delegates to support the minority report, to give some victory for the liberals to carry away from the convention. As a result, the minority amendment was passed, even though the Carter campaign had originally opposed it. The whip system worked to perfection.

There was a whip system at this convention as well; we all saw it functioning. Surely you do not believe that those "Hope is on the Way" signs sprouted simultaneously. Think back at the orchestration of the crowd reaction. "O-bam-a!! O-bam-a!!" Or the "Elizabeth" signs. Or all of the others. That is what the whip system has become—cheerleading. Little else, because all of the results were known in advance.

So, why the conventions? Why do we object to the major networks showing only three hours of convention coverage? Why did Brian Lamb of C-SPAN chide the major news anchors for not fighting to show more of the convention—if the convention is only a show?

We think that the answer is simple. Conventions, orchestrated as they are, do matter. They let the viewing public see the face that the party wants to present. Barack Obama's speech was important; it expressed the views of the Democratic party that are very different from those of the Republicans—and the Republican speakers will do the same in four weeks. This is important; this is important for the nation to hear.

But the convention did more than that—and is designed to do so. For months polls have shown President Bush and Senator Kerry running neck and neck in the presidential race. But, as *Boston Globe* columnist Ellen Goodman persuasively put it ([see link](#)), those polls were really all about President Bush, not about Senator Kerry. The Democrats in this convention had to convert ABB (Anyone But Bush) into JFK (John Forbes Kerry). And that is how the convention must be judged. Did the nation come to know the Democratic presidential candidate in a way to support him, not to oppose the incumbent? In our view, it is in the best interest of the polity for the citizens to know the presidential candidates. And, as a consequence, the networks had a social obligation to show more of the convention.

We will leave for you, the readers, to judge whether you liked what John Kerry said, whether you liked the way in which he was presented to the electorate, whether those of you who were for ABB found a candidate whom they would support for president, and whether those of you who favor President Bush for reelection came away with a sense of what leadership would be like under a Kerry administration. Mostly we believe that the information was presented at the convention that would allow any citizen to come away with a judgment about the Democratic party and its nominee. We do not believe that many Americans saw and absorbed that information, in part because the major television networks did not throw their considerable weight behind presenting that information. It was there in person, it was there on C-SPAN, but the message was clear: If Tom Brokaw, Dan Rather, and Peter Jennings, ABC, CBS, and NBC, did not think it important enough to cover, why should citizens tune in?