

In our country, we hold elections to pick the leaders of our government. The people who vote for a losing candidate generally do not throw too big of a fit when their candidate loses. These people generally feel that they had a fair chance of winning, and instead of complaining about the most recent election result, they simply hope that their favorite candidates do better in future elections. Generally, people do not give too much thought to the rules that govern elections, which is fine because most elections are not won by tiny margins. A candidate who wins with 65% of the vote is going to win the election regardless of what the details of the rules look like.

This year, the republican primary is very close, and most likely a candidate will not win enough delegates before the convention to become the nominee of the party. Instead, the delegates at the convention will hold a series of votes to determine who will become the republican nominee. During this process, the rules will matter. Some states only require their delegates to vote in the first round of voting for the candidate who won the election in the delegate's district. After this first round of voting, the delegates can vote for any candidate. The rules, which determine what delegates are allowed to do, vary by state.

The upcoming republican election will probably be a contested convention, which is one where the outcome is not known before the convention starts. This type of convention does not happen very often, simply because most elections are not this close. Therefore, there are only a few historical examples of contested elections to give us an idea about how a contested convention will play out. Fortunately, there is another type of election that may offer some insight into what we can expect during the upcoming republican convention. The type of elections I am thinking of are the elections of new Catholic Popes. These elections, particularly the ones that occurred in the 15th and 16th century, may help us predict what we will see this summer.

When a pope dies or resigns, the Catholic cardinals meet in the Sistine chapel underneath Michelangelo's famous ceiling painting, and they vote for who should be the next pope. Often, several rounds of voting are required to obtain a winner. The cardinals, who are merely frail humans like the rest of us, were often bribed to vote for a certain candidate. For instance, Giovanni de Medici provided money to bribe cardinals so that his favorite cardinal could become pope. The new pope rewarded the Medici bank, and the bank became the primary bank for the Catholic Church. This business was so lucrative that half of all of the profits earned by the geographically extensive Medici bank were earned in Rome. This business helped the Medici become one of the great banking families in European history. In later years, Lorenzo de Medici mismanaged the bank, leaving the family without enough money to provide the bribes necessary to help finance the election of one of their own family members to the papacy. They enlisted the help of Filippo Strozzi, the richest person in Florence at the time, to provide the money needed to pay bribes in the papal election that allowed a Medici to become Pope Leo X. An even more famous example occurred in 1492 when Rodrigo Borgia, who became Alexander VI, bribed one cardinal with between 4 and 6 donkeys carrying bags of gold in exchange for the cardinal's vote in the Sistine Chapel.

It may seem unrealistic that in modern times, the bribery, which we saw during the Renaissance, would occur again. Well it certainly did occur during the last contested republican convention. In 1976, President Ford and Ronald Reagan went into the convention without enough delegates to secure the nomination. James Baker, who has served in many high government positions, including Secretary of State, was in charge of the Ford campaign's effort to convince delegates to vote for Ford. In an interview, Baker said that the delegates were wined and dined. He also said that delegates asked for government jobs in exchange for their votes. While Baker never said such requests were granted, the fact that delegates were looking to sell their votes for their own personal gain suggests that political bribery could have occurred. Baker did admit that Ford had an advantage. As an incumbent President, Ford had more to offer delegates in the way of bribes than Reagan did.

I do not claim to know what the result will be in the upcoming contested convention. However, I am pretty confident that the efforts to influence delegates will not pass the smell test. While no delegate will receive all of the gold that several donkeys can carry, many will receive personal benefits that will seem inappropriate to the American public. The shame is that this monkey business will lessen our collective faith in the just outcomes of elections and make it just a little bit less likely that people will accept being on the losing side of an election without also thinking that an injustice was committed.