

## CFR Backgrounders

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### Foreign Policy at the Conventions

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#### Introduction

Every four years, in the summer leading up to the U.S. presidential election, the major political parties hold national conventions to crown their nominees, issue policy platforms, and conduct other business. These multi-day gatherings of political elite are also media events designed to promote the parties' visions for the country, defend (or attack) the current administration, and rally their bases ahead of the November vote.

Conventions tend to focus on the parties' domestic priorities, but foreign policy and national security issues regularly come to the fore, especially during periods of global instability or armed conflict. In the elections since 9/11, convention speeches and party platforms have waded into the debates over terrorism, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, nuclear proliferation, cybersecurity, and other relevant topics like immigration, human rights, trade, energy and climate change.

#### What happens at the conventions?

Contemporary conventions tend to be choreographed affairs intended to showcase party leaders, rising stars, and celebrity supporters to a primetime television audience. Over a period of three to four days, carefully crafted speeches and videos promoting a party's message are interwoven with official business, including the appointment of committee members, and ratification of party rules, credentials, and policy platforms. Conventions culminate in the nomination (and acceptance speeches) of the party's presidential and vice presidential candidates.

Much of the suspense associated with many past conventions—particularly the mystery of who would win a majority of the delegates (and the nomination)—largely petered out beginning in the 1970s [when the parties opened up the primary process](#). This transparency has allowed presumptive nominees to emerge during the spring.

#### How does foreign policy factor into these events?

The foreign policy issues discussed and the priority they are given in convention speeches and party platforms mostly reflect the national and international dynamics of the day. During times of conflict, especially when the United States is under threat, foreign policy and security concerns take center stage. In 2004, after 9/11 had [transformed the international security landscape](#) and tens of thousands of U.S. troops were fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq, both parties led with foreign policy, laying out their plans to win the “war on terror” and stop the spread of “weapons of mass destruction.”

These issues featured prominently again in the 2008 Republican platform, which opened with a

chapter titled “Defending Our Nation, Supporting Our Heroes, Securing the Peace.” Meanwhile, the Democrats that year bumped foreign policy down to the second section titled “Renewing American Leadership” (the first dealt with the ailing economy).

Four years later, when voters’ basic economic concerns had eclipsed nearly all others, both parties pushed most discussion of foreign and security policy to concluding sections in their platforms.

On the other hand, during periods of relative international stability, foreign policy and national security tend to take a back seat to kitchen-table concerns like taxes, education, health care, and jobs. For instance, both the **Democratic** and **Republican** platforms of 2000 opened with a section on “prosperity,” while relegating most discussion of foreign policy to later chapters.



But even during such cycles, parties raise foreign policy to the extent they can use the issue to criticize the opposition or laud their candidate, especially given the president’s role as commander-in-chief. For instance, during the 2000 Republican convention, **retired Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf**, who commanded U.S. troops during the first Gulf War, suggested that the Clinton administration had allowed the military to atrophy over the previous eight years. Days later, at the Democratic convention, the outgoing president **defended his record**, including his military and foreign policy achievements. “We are more secure, and we’re more free because of our leadership in the world for peace, freedom, and prosperity: helping to end a generation of conflict in Northern Ireland, stopping the brutal ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Kosovo, and bringing the Middle East closer than ever to a comprehensive peace,” Clinton said.

### **How are policy platforms crafted?**

A platform is a written statement—some have run nearly a hundred pages—that lists a party’s governing priorities and policy prescriptions. So-called planks in the platform speak to particular issues. The document is drafted ahead of the convention by a group of delegates known as the Platform Committee, whose leadership is typically **appointed by the respective party’s chairperson** (PDF). Platforms are often debated and amended in subcommittees before adoption, usually by the second day of the event.

Platforms attempt to sew together some of the cleavages the primaries may have opened within the party. Planks may be crafted in such a way to satisfy highly vocal blocs that may not be representative of the whole party.

### **Do conventions signal the foreign policy of an incoming president?**

Policy platforms, much like candidates’ pledges on the campaign trail, are not binding. While they may reflect the policy wish lists of the candidate and party, events of the day and the president’s relationship with Congress often play larger roles in determining policy. Still, platforms—and the internal debates that shape them—are indicative of the parties’ often distinct worldviews.

### **Is foreign policy a divisive issue at conventions?**

Different factions within a party, often supporting rival candidates, have locked horns at the conventions over certain foreign policy positions. At the 2012 Democratic convention, controversy broke out after the party platform was circulated without **language recognizing Jerusalem as**

[Israel's capital](#). (The U.S. government does not.) The line was reintroduced the following day in an awkward session.

U.S. policy toward Israel was also a hot topic on the Republican side that year, with elements within the party [pushing the platform committee](#) to drop language endorsing the so-called two-state-solution: “We envision two democratic states—Israel with Jerusalem as its capital and Palestine—living in peace and security.” (The amendment failed.) GOP delegates also [sparred](#) over defense spending, detention policy, and immigration.

Going back further, at the [1976 Republican convention](#), Secretary of State Henry Kissinger reportedly threatened to resign from the Ford administration following changes the campaign allowed supporters of Gov. Ronald Reagan to make to the platform's foreign policy plank. The Reagan camp inserted a section called “[Morality in Foreign Policy](#)” that seemed to challenge the existing U.S. policy of détente: “Ours will be a foreign policy which recognizes that in international negotiations we must make no undue concessions; that in pursuing détente we must not grant unilateral favors with only the hope of getting future favors in return.” Indeed, in the weeks leading up to the convention, which was closely contested, Reagan zeroed in on Ford's foreign policy, claiming that “under Kissinger and Ford, this nation has become number two in a world where it is dangerous—if not fatal—to be second best.”

And, in perhaps the most notable example of an intra-party clash over foreign policy, Democratic delegates at the 1968 convention in Chicago [split sharply over the so-called Vietnam plank](#) in a draft of the party platform. Supporters of Vice President Hubert Humphrey and those of his liberal rival Sen. Eugene McCarthy disagreed intensely over how and when to end the U.S. bombing campaign of North Vietnam. After some [two hours of raucous debate](#) on the issue, Humphrey backers won a vote rejecting the minority plank on the convention floor.

### **What are the prospects for controversy at the 2016 conventions?**

Some foreign policy and related issues may serve as sticking points at this summer's conventions. On the Democratic side, some analysts wonder if U.S. policy toward Israel will once again cause friction. Sen. Bernie Sanders and his followers have generally been more critical than former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her backers of [Israel's policies](#) in the Palestinian territories.

Meanwhile, the Vermont lawmaker has been [more critical](#) than Clinton of U.S. trade policy, strongly opposing NAFTA and the pending Trans-Pacific Partnership. He has also been more forceful in calls for [regulating the oil and gas industry](#). Some Democrats fear that Sanders and his followers will push delegates at the convention to support a national ban on fracking, a position that could alienate general election voters in pivotal states like Ohio.

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Republican side, foreign policy may also be a source of controversy at the convention. Front-runner Donald Trump, like some of his Democratic competitors, has lambasted free trade agreements like NAFTA, deals which he says largely benefit foreign countries and move U.S. jobs overseas. The candidate's position runs counter to that of many influential figures in the Republican Party, including House Speaker Paul Ryan, who is reportedly authoring with other GOP leaders a [parallel policy agenda for the election season](#), "a supplement of sorts to the official party platform," according to the *New York Times*.

Trump has also staked out some provocative positions on immigration and national security, including plans to deport all undocumented immigrants, temporarily ban all Muslims from entering the United States, reinstitute harsh interrogation techniques, and, potentially, renegotiate major strategic alliances, including NATO. Many political analysts question if and how Republicans will be able to reconcile these stances with [those of other members](#).

### **Additional Resources**

The American Presidency Project at the University of California at Santa Barbara hosts an [archive of the political party platforms](#) dating back to the mid-nineteenth century.

Politico presents an engaging oral history of the [1976 Republican convention](#) in Kansas City, where the Ford and Reagan campaigns battled intensely for every last delegate.

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