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## POLITICAL BLING

# Today's scripted conventions are about showcasing talent, not making real decisions

By Calvin Woodward The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Modern political conventions are like a Super Bowl minus the game.

They are the bling on the body politic: shiny, pretty and a touch goofy. They exist to be seen, more than to do.

They are like a Miss America pageant where the fix is in. The Olympic opening and closing ceremonies without all that sweating in between.

It's the party having a party. Politics is put to choreography, each song chosen for certain effect, each sign — even the crude, seemingly spontaneous ones — part of a script.

What's the point? Is there a point somewhere in that sea of nutty hats?

In essence, conventions tell voters it's time to focus on their choices in the November election as the diversions of summer slip away.

The Democrats in Denver and the Republicans in St. Paul, Minn., will honor their past and trot out their rising stars. Mostly what they'll do is showcase Barack Obama and John McCain with every bit of eye candy, pleasing rhetoric and excitement they can muster — as long as that excitement is not generated by dissent.

### Priceless exposure

When 75,000 people come out to hear Obama accept the nomination at Invesco Field at Mile High, home of football's Denver Broncos, on Thursday, that won't be his biggest crowd of the year. But it will be his biggest crowd with so many voters watching on TV.

That kind of priceless exposure is the principal reason for the modern political convention. Americans will see Hillary Rodham Clinton bury any lingering animosity from being defeated by Obama in the primaries. They'll see McCain the GOP iconoclast take the party forward as his own.

Another reason to meet is old-fashioned organization.

Obama's rally will double as a staging ground for voter registration when the tens of thousands in the audience are implored to use call lists and text messages to bring people around the country on board.

But the convention as a struggle between party factions over power and ideas? That's so yesterday.

The one thing worse than being boring for the modern convention is being fractious. Organizers would rather you turn off the TV than see disharmony.

## **Dearth of drama**

What suspense exists in the proceedings is grafted on to them — namely, the candidate's choice of a running mate, announced during or shortly before everyone gets together.

Blame democracy for the dearth of drama.

Presidential candidates used to be picked by members of Congress who caucused in the Capitol. Cycles of reform followed but the back-room boys stayed in the thick of it one way or another, well past the first Democratic convention in 1832 and the first Republican one in 1856.

Primaries, which let voters in the states elect convention delegates, debuted in the early 1900s but often did not settle the race, requiring horse-trading and multiple ballots on the convention floor.

The 1960 Democratic convention was one turning point. John F. Kennedy beat Hubert Humphrey in Wisconsin and West Virginia and went to the convention backed by primary delegates while Lyndon B. Johnson arm-twisted the party bosses.

Kennedy — and the new ways — prevailed.

But it took the ruinous 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago, which betrayed deep fractures over the Vietnam War, for the party to push the primary system firmly to the fore and restrict the ability of delegates to act outside of it.

## **Avoiding discord**

Since then, the imperative has been to avoid a discordant note of any sort.

The 1980 Democratic convention marked the last time a major candidate went into a convention trying to wrest support from delegates pledged to a rival. Ted Kennedy's effort fell short, Jimmy Carter won and persuaded his rival to join in an awkward and unconvincing unity photo.

Republicans haven't needed a second ballot since 1948 but they've had their share of angst, too.

In 1976, Ronald Reagan wrestled President Ford for the nomination all the way to Kansas City, each man showing up days early to press wavering delegates. The machinations spilled over into the raucous convention, until Ford's forces rallied and won the day.

In 1992, losing GOP contender Patrick Buchanan injected a dark note into convention proceedings with a speech that invoked "a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America — it is a cultural war."

The remark was just the most pointed expression of conservative grievances that infused a convention designed to re-elect the first President Bush.

The lessons of 1968, 1976, 1980 and 1992 are not lost on anyone: The party whose convention showed divisions for all to see, was defeated in the election. Convention unity is no guarantee of success; disunity is nothing but trouble.