

Delegate count: The Ickes strategy past and present

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [April 22, 2008](#) issue

As a delegate and organizer at six Democratic national conventions (those that nominated George McGovern, Jimmy Carter [twice], Bill Clinton [twice] and Al Gore), I offer this advice to the campaigns of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton: settle the nominating business before you go to Denver. Convention floor fights delight the media but damage the nominee.

Delegate strategy for the Obama campaign is in the hands of David Axelrod, whom I met in 1984 when he was a *Chicago Tribune* political reporter covering the Senate primary campaign of Paul Simon and I was Simon's campaign manager. After Simon won a four-way primary race, Axelrod succeeded me and guided Simon to a general election victory.

I met Hillary Clinton adviser and delegate strategist Harold Ickes as an adversary. We were on the floor of the 1980 convention that nominated Jimmy Carter to run for a second term. I was the chief floor whip for Carter's Illinois delegation; Ickes was directing Ted Kennedy's delegate race. Carter arrived at the convention with a 2,129 to 1,150 delegate lead over Kennedy. Having won a majority of the delegates in the primaries and caucuses, Carter had guaranteed his nomination and, he hoped, a unified convention.

It was assumed that Kennedy would withdraw from the race before the convention opened. But Kennedy and Ickes had another idea. Determined to poach enough Carter delegates to overcome Carter's majority, Ickes introduced a rules change that would have removed a "faithful delegate" rule that obligated delegates to vote for the candidate to whom they were pledged.

While network television reporters roamed the convention floor sniffing for signs of disharmony, Ickes sent out operatives to strong-arm Carter delegates. His poaching effort failed, however, and the faithful-delegate rule was retained. Two years later a more nuanced rule stated: "Delegates shall in all good conscience reflect the

sentiments of those who elected them.” This sounds like a faithful-delegate rule to me.

Columnist Howard Fineman describes Ickes as an abrasive lawyer who “once bit the leg of a foe in a political clubhouse brawl and threatened to slam a congresswoman into the Broadway pavement.” But, Fineman adds, Ickes “knows more about the mechanics of Democratic presidential politics than any person alive” (*Newsweek*, February 20).

Hillary Clinton chose Ickes as her personal delegate guru, even though as the favorite to seize the nomination on Super Tuesday, she could not have anticipated many delegate problems. It never hurts, however, to have the party’s delegate expert on your team, especially a friend who once served as a member of Bill Clinton’s White House staff.

Clinton failed to win the nomination in February, and nine primaries and caucuses remain after the Pennsylvania primary April 22. Meanwhile, Obama and Clinton are courting unpledged superdelegates who belong to a category created in 1982.

It was after the riot-marred 1968 Chicago convention that party leaders realized that the time for boss-ruled, largely white-male conventions was over. The party adopted new rules to be used in 1972 to ensure the presence of women, ethnic minorities and young people in every delegation, all of whom would be chosen by voters in primary and caucus elections and pledged to a specific candidate. Every candidate slate had to include an equal number of men and women and a percentage of delegates that reflected the ethnic makeup in each state.

As in any process, there was a downside. Too many party leaders were left out. To regain the experience of these missing party and elected officials (PLEOs), the party created the category of unpledged delegates while also retaining the gender and ethnicity requirements. The PLEOs, who were dubbed superdelegates, are free to vote for any candidate, but they do not form any kind of appeals court that can render a group decision. They sit and vote with pledged delegates from their respective states.

I have organized state delegations with and without super-delegates, and I believe the Democratic Party has created a good system. The Republican Party has followed suit, adding national committee members as unpledged delegates. (The Republicans have no mandated gender and ethnicity requirements.)

Ickes and Axelrod are aware of the 40-year evolving history of this rules system. They also know that following the final primaries in Montana and South Dakota on June 3, the candidate with the most delegates should be accepted as the party's nominee. Those are the rules.