

First-Timers Guide to the Maine Republican Party State Convention

Introduction

When I went to my first state convention in May 2004, it took me the better part of the two days to get my bearings.

I felt the same way I did the first time I went to an Episcopalian service: everyone but me seemed very comfortable with the formality, the language, and the proceedings. The sitting and standing was more predictable than it was at church. And fortunately, you clap at just about every pause during a political speech. But boy did I mess up when it came to the first vote! And I was told, in detail, how I messed up! Some of experienced folks were so familiar with the format that they didn't know how to explain it to me. I'll tell that story later.

This is meant to be a humorous look at a very important part of our political scene. I in no way intend to offend anyone. My purpose is to shorten the learning curve for future new comers. We need more people involved in politics at all levels. I hope this guide will encourage more people to jump in.

Disclaimer: my first state convention took place in an election year. We were preparing to elect officials to all seats from state seats right up to the Congress and President. It was the first time in 50 years that Republicans had candidates for every state seat! I know every convention is probably different but I'm convinced my experience will help others find the way through their first convention.

Three Simultaneous Activities

The State Convention is like a three ring circus. Three things are happening at the same time:

1. voting—doing the actual work of the convention
2. rally—cheering on the candidates and learning the talking points of the election issues
3. homecoming—not so much for newbies but lots of people meet others every year

These are played out throughout the duration of the two days, weaving in and out. Seeing it this way can help explain why, when you've just voted and sent your ballots for counting, the lights go out and rock music starts playing--you've just moved from a voting ring to a rally ring.

Getting Your Bearings

The Program

When you arrive at the convention, take the time to familiarize yourself with the program. It has all sorts of information including the schedule of events, the platform of the party, the party by-laws, and more. People from the stage refer to these at various times and it's good to have an idea where to turn. In 2004, we celebrated Olympia Snowe's 25th year of service in Congress so there were *lots* of advertisements. It took me a while to realize these ads were laid out by county. It's nice to see what businesses and people in your area think conservatively.

Get there early enough to participate in the opening ceremony each day. If you dawdle in the lobby, you'll miss out. I was locked out for my first day but that was even nice. It's incredibly refreshing to see an event open with heart-felt prayer and a respectful presentation of the flag and pledge of allegiance. It's rare today to find a group that won't let you mill around during an event. Don't be misled, milling around happens A LOT during the convention. People are talking and reading all the time! But not during the opening ceremonies. If you do miss it the first day, be sure to get there for them on the second.

Seating and Meeting Rooms

Seating at the state convention is determined by county. Just walk into the main room and look for your county's sign. It's confidence building to walk into a room and confidently walk to a row of seats. You look like you have a purpose; like you know what you're doing. Of course that ends as soon as you get to the seats—who do you sit with? But at least you looked self-assured for a few minutes.

While sitting with your county, try noticing who seems to know everyone *and* seems normal. These are people it's safe to be ignorant with. For me, two of those people are Rosemary Butler and Lois Snow-Mello. Both women are matriarchs in the Republican work in Androscoggin County and neither made me feel like an idiot when I asked dumb questions like, "What district are we in?"

Some of the convention is committed to county and district caucuses. Knowing where these are held is incredibly helpful in building confidence. Especially if the convention is at the Augusta Civic Center. The county caucuses are held in rooms named after the counties. But don't go to the room with the name of your county! For whatever reason, and I'm sure it's a good one, Androscoggin County met in the Sagadahoc room! So take a few minutes to find your rooms on the map. I even recommend walking to the room just to be sure you know where it is.

Having said that, it is a good idea to come to the convention knowing what district you are in. Beware! There are two kinds of districts: national and state. Maine has only two U.S. Congressional districts so that narrows the possibilities quite a bit. Unfortunately, Maine has 151 House state districts! That takes a bit longer to figure out.

The Maine State web site has great information on it in the "government: elections and voting section." That brings you to the page for the Bureau of Corporations, Elections, and Commissions. In 2004, the listing was found at: <http://www.maine.gov/sos/cec/elec/eledist.htm> (yes, it's more than a little disconcerting that listing says it's only good through 2003...). I know municipal websites are quite helpful too. Lewiston makes its map of districts pretty easy to find.

Roberts Rules made easy

Just about all of the work of the party gets done according to Roberts Rules of Order. I have *no* idea who Robert was or how he came up with these rules.

I've been a parliamentarian debater and on a number of boards that use these rules so I have a passing familiarity with them. You'll also need a passing familiarity if you're going to feel like

you have a clue about what's happening. If you've ever been through a board meeting, you'll probably be prepared enough to navigate this aspect of the State Convention.

Here are some of the most common phrases that came up during the state convention with a brief explanation of their meaning. Most meetings—main floor, county, national district—always start with voting on a secretary and a chairperson. These motions seem to be part of the script for many of these formalities but they seem important nonetheless.

Common Terms used in Robert's Rules

“I make a motion to...”

Technically, it should be “I move to...” but since the chair responds by saying, “There's a motion to...” most people think they're making a motion. They're not. They're moving. Anyway, this is how work gets done. People move to do something; others second it; and it gets discussed and then voted on.

“...to adjourn.”

Probably the most satisfying motion, it's best to save this until *after* the business is accomplished. Promptly adjourning a meeting is a relief to all; pre-maturely attempting to adjourn one is simply embarrassing to you.

“...close nominations.”

This is actually shorthand for something like “I move that nominations cease and the secretary cast a vote in favor of the ballot.” This helps move things along, especially if you're filling uncontested positions.

“I second it”

Every motion needs to be seconded. You're just saying you agree with the motion that was just moved (or is “on the floor”). This is the safest one to say so have fun with it. Use it and you'll feel like an insider in no time!

Note: there is always supposed to be time for discussion after a motion is seconded. In reality, this often doesn't happen. I'm sure it speeds things up but if you do object to the motion and you don't get a chance to say so, you could probably rise on a “point of order.”

“I move the question...”

This is a really fun one. It means, “I'm tired of all the discussion. Can we please get on with voting?” Like all motions, this needs seconding. This motion needs to be voted on before the original question can be voted on. This is an effective tool in cutting off long winded people that are trying to get their 15 minutes of fame.

Voting on motions

Most voting at the state convention is done by voice. It's supposed to be "All in favor say 'aye.' [pause] All opposed say 'nay.'" [another, albeit much shorter, pause] Then the chair determines who the louder group was and declares who wins.

In reality, it sounds more like this, "All in favor say 'aye.' [pause] Since there are no objections the 'aye's' have it." I'm not quite sure when there was a *chance* for an objection but that seemed to be beside the point.

One more thing: If you believe a point or motion is no longer valid, you may call it a "moot" point. If you're sophisticated enough to want to call attention to this, please don't call it a "mute" point. Mutes are people that can't speak. Calling a motion "mute" causes you to lack all credibility. You mean "moot." Trust me.

All these terms must be "recognized by the chair" to be addressed. No, that doesn't mean the chair says, "Didn't we meet at the Feingold bar mitzvah?" It simply means that the chair is the referee keeping the ball in play. That's why you'll hear multiple people making motions, especially moving to adjourn. You just need to get it out there. It's the chair's privilege to acknowledge what he or she wants.

RING I: Voting

Voting is one of the three "rings" of the convention circus. Your seat is forever papered with candidates "pitches" and you get them in your hands an on the walls. In 2004, the most leaflets came from people running for National Committee—woman and for delegates to the national convention in New York. I'm not entirely sure what the National Committee woman and National Committee man do. I think this is a non-paying position with the Republican Party. Evidently, each state gets to vote for a male and female rep.

How to vote by county

This is where I really messed up on my first day. We were voting for National committeewoman. I took a blank ballot that was thrust in my face and voted. I then found out I was to give it to the "Lewiston" person since I lived in Lewiston. It turns out I'd taken the blank ballot from "Poland." Wanting to rectify the situation, I gave my ballot to Lewiston and asked for a blank one to replenish Poland's supply. No dice. A zealous person ardently lectured me on:

- (1) how to vote,
- (2) in extreme detail how I messed up, and
- (3) why my solution of replenishing the Poland supply was entirely unsatisfactory.

I'd already figured out (1) and (2) but to this day I am unclear on (3). The blank ballot was exactly the same.

Oh well, hopefully my experience will help other newbies avoid this anxiety. Here are the rules, as I understand them: when the person on stage says voting is by county:

- Lots of people will be looking helpful with all their blank ballots. Resist the urge to grab one. Instead...
- Look for the person representing your city or town with in your county

- Take the ballot from that person
- Vote
- Return your ballot *to the same person* you took it from. Resist the urge to give it to others, no matter how helpful they look.

Voting on amendments to the party platform

These votes were done by voice vote. This time, there was actually a pause for folks to say “nay.” Even though they all seemed like an overwhelming “yay,” I “nay’d” two of the three amendments. The wonderful woman ahead of me told me to speak up! The groupthink that goes on in this type of setting is incredibly frustrating. It felt like a moral victory to be one of the three people that said “nay”!

Rally

This part of the convention surprised me. We’d cast our ballot for some vote and all of a sudden rock music started to boom and the lights would go out. At least for the two U.S. Congress candidates. The state senate candidates were introduced with personal comments. Fortunately, the 151 state house candidates were announced and walked across stage.

In 2004, the two seats in the U.S. House of Representatives were up for election. Both candidates got to speak to the convention. Both had orchestrated hoopla with pre-arranged people shouting and marching down the aisle before they came on. The Maine College Republicans were an enthusiastic group of students that made this portion of the weekend much more enjoyable.

We also were privileged to hear from both Senator Olympia Snowe and Senator Susan Collins. Most of the speeches amounted to preaching to the choir. But it is *very* nice to see that other Mainers think like I do! It also helped me develop some common talking points that I’ll use in explaining my Republican views and my support for President Bush. Finally, it introduced me to candidates I hadn’t known.

Homecoming

This is probably the least important aspect of the weekend for newcomers. It was nice to see people from all over the state meeting long time friends. Some folks have been coming to convention for decades. They must really like this stuff!

The meals you can buy tickets for are probably an important part of this event. I’d imagine you get to rub elbows with important people. Me? I ended up eating with some other newbies at Panera Bread across the street. We revelled in our pooled ignorance of what was going on.

And, like any good homecoming, there is the opportunity to buy paraphernalia. T-shirts, hats, stickers, pins, pet toys, you name it, they have it. I particularly enjoyed the selection presented by GOPShoppe.com.

6 Ways to Make Your First Convention More Fun

To wrap this guide up, I'll offer these take-aways: six things you can do to make the convention enjoyable (or "more enjoyable"!).

1. Get to know people at the local level by attending a party meeting or a caucus.
2. Find other newbies. It's more fun to go through this experience in mutual ignorance.
3. Look for people that seem to know what's going on and are friendly. Often the people that know what going in on politics are *not* the friendly ones. People that are both knowledgeable and approachable will be invaluable to you.
4. Make the weekend a game. Try to anticipate what will happen next or what the next speaker will say. Or try to jump in and "second" a motion. When all else fails, look around the room and try to imagine what it looked like 100 years ago and 200 years ago. We've been moving the country forward by this process for centuries. (As hard as that may be to imagine!)
5. Get your bearings as soon as you can. Arriving a few minutes early will allow you to: find the bathrooms, locate the rooms for your county and district meetings, and see where the food is being sold. All will make your time MUCH more enjoyable. (Remember, just because a room at the Augusta Civic Center is named after your county does NOT mean that is where your county is meeting!)
6. Don't take yourself too seriously. Enough other people are doing that. Just relax and enjoy yourself. This is an amazingly important part of living in a representative democracy like the U.S. As frustrating as the posturing and politicking can be, it's fun to see how local decisions really do influence national elections.