

A Complicated Path to the Democratic Nomination

Bernie Sanders says winning a plurality of delegates is good enough for the nomination. His rivals say a majority is needed. What does that mean? And why are superdelegates coming up again?



Superdelegates raised the ire of Bernie Sanders’s supporters in 2016. Credit...Eric Thayer for The New York Times

Matt Stevens, *The New York Times* National Edition, February 22, 2020, p. 18.

The last question at Wednesday night’s Democratic debate covered much wonkier territory than the fiery exchanges that preceded it. But it exposed a rift over what could become an extremely relevant topic: how the party’s presidential nominee should be chosen.

“There’s a very good chance none of you are going to have enough delegates to the Democratic National Convention to clinch this nomination,” the moderator Chuck Todd told the candidates. “Should the person with the most delegates at the end of this primary season be the nominee even if they are short of a majority?”

Every four years, pundits imagine such a scenario. But with [eight Democrats still in the 2020 race](#), several of whom could split the available delegates, the premise may be more than theoretical this time around.

Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont was the only candidate to agree that, in his words, “the person with the most votes” should get the nomination. This was not surprising given that he is currently the front-runner and — at least at the moment — appears to be the candidate most likely to win a plurality, but perhaps not a majority, of pledged delegates.

The rest of the candidates said some version of “No, let the process work” or “Play by the rules.” In other words, a candidate should still be required to win a majority of delegates to earn the nomination.

So what, exactly, are the rules? How would the “process” actually work? What needs to be done to win a majority? And why was Mr. Sanders complaining about “superdelegates”? Let’s try to explain.

How to win the Democratic nomination, the easy way

To win the Democratic nomination for president, a candidate needs the support of a majority of delegates eligible to vote on a given ballot at the party’s national convention in Milwaukee in July.

There are a total of 3,979 pledged delegates (who are actual people) eligible to vote on what is known as the first ballot. These delegates are allocated to candidates based on the results of caucus and primary contests in the states. The formulas that determine how those results are translated into delegates won can be complicated, but in general, a candidate must get 15 percent support to be eligible to receive delegates.

Half of 3,979 is 1,989.5. Democratic National Committee officials say that on the first ballot, a candidate must win one delegate more than that, or 1,990.5, which is rounded up to reach the magic number: 1,991. (If a candidate won 1,990 pledged delegates on the first ballot, D.N.C. officials say, that would not be sufficient.)

So, in summary, the quickest and least complicated way to win the nomination is for a candidate to secure 1,991 pledged delegates on the first ballot at the Democratic National Convention in July. (We are keeping track of [how many delegates each candidate has](#).)

But as Mr. Todd noted at the debate, there is a chance no candidate will end up with 1,991 pledged delegates before the convention.

What happens if no one gets a majority?

If no one gets 1,991 votes on the first ballot, then things could get more complicated. This is the scenario people refer to when they use the phrase “contested convention” or “brokered convention.”

In this situation, there would be a second ballot. And on the second ballot, there are votes from two sets of delegates:

- Votes from the 3,979 pledged delegates, who are allowed to support a different candidate on the second ballot if they so choose
- An additional 771 votes from “automatic delegates,” commonly known as superdelegates

To win the nomination, a candidate still must earn a majority of the votes on a given ballot. In this case, that means she or he must amass more than 2,375 pledged and automatic delegates. (In the second and subsequent rounds, a few automatic delegates get only half votes; the D.N.C. says the magic number is 2,375.5, which this time is not rounded up.)

It is theoretically possible that the nomination process would extend through multiple ballots until one candidate hits the magic number (2,375.5) and prevails. One thing to keep in mind is that delegates do not need to stay with the candidate to whom they were originally allocated and can move around.



Mr. Sanders called for Hillary Clinton to be nominated after Vermont’s roll call vote at the 2016 Democratic National Convention. Credit...Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Who are these superdelegates?

Basically, superdelegates are party insiders and V.I.P.s — and they can support whomever they want.

Specifically, they include:

- Members of the Democratic National Committee itself
- Democratic members of Congress
- Democratic governors

- Distinguished party leaders, like former presidents, for instance

Superdelegates have never overridden the will of Democratic voters in a presidential primary in the modern era, since 1972. But their role caused considerable consternation during the 2016 primary between Mr. Sanders and Hillary Clinton; some of Mr. Sanders's supporters claimed that superdelegates were responsible for having "rigged" the nomination system from within to benefit Mrs. Clinton.

In 2018, Democratic Party officials agreed to [changes in the rules](#) — which Sanders backers pushed hard for — that effectively barred superdelegates from participating in the first ballot.

Will there be a 'contested' or 'brokered' convention?

D.N.C. officials have long insisted that a contested convention, sometimes called a brokered convention, is unlikely. Among their arguments:

- Media outlets speculate about the possibility of a contested convention every cycle, but it seldom comes to pass and hasn't happened in decades.
- In this cycle, only two states have voted so far; there are still many more results to come, and voters may begin to coalesce around a single candidate who does in fact go on to win the majority of pledged delegates.
- Even if no one gets to 1,991 delegates, delegates are not legally bound to vote for the candidate to whom they have been allocated. As candidates lose momentum, some could leave the race. Other campaigns could reach out behind the scenes, and a majority of delegates could end up supporting a single candidate by the time the convention rolls around.

That said, there is a chance things will remain unsettled by July. If that happens, candidates could work to convince delegates to come into their camp at the convention itself. Who wins in that chaotic situation is anybody's guess.

And that explains why five of the six candidates on the debate stage this week did not commit to simply handing the nomination to the candidate with the most delegates at the end of the primary. They would rather roll the dice in a contested convention than commit to declaring a winner based on a plurality.

This article also was published in the online edition of *The New York Times* with the title "How to Win the Democratic Nomination, and Why it Could Get Complicated."

See Democracy in Action, P2020: The Race for the White House, for an online book that covers the 2020 presidential election from "Context" and "Pre-Campaign" to "Election Day" and "Inauguration."

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