

# Oregon High School Model Presidential Nominating Convention

By Jeffrey Kovac

Every four years from 1964 to 2004, high school students from Oregon and other western states organized into state delegations for the Oregon High School Model Presidential Nominating Convention. They researched the policy positions of one of Oregon's political parties to prepare for deliberations that included establishing a party platform, evaluating the credentials of delegations, and nominating a candidate for president. The first conventions were organized by Sunset High School, and beginning in 1972 they were sponsored by the Oregon Council for Social Studies.

The first high school Model Presidential Nominating Convention in Oregon was held at Sunset High School in Beaverton. Similar model conventions had been held at colleges and universities, such as Washington and Lee University in Virginia, but there is no record of conventions at other American high schools. President Lyndon Johnson, a Democrat, was in office in 1964, and teachers James Barlow and Merle Cressy decided to organize a mock Republican convention because it was more likely to have a contentious nomination.

The teachers' goal was to provide students with direct experience with the political process. Sophomores, juniors, and seniors were members of the delegations, and freshmen were the floor demonstrators. The students drafted a party platform before the convention, conducted floor debates on the issues, approved the credentials of all delegations, and resolved disputes. The convention ended with a vote on the presidential nominee. Faculty organizers encouraged the delegations to cast their votes on the first ballot for favorite sons, which meant that no candidate got a majority and students could negotiate and make deals as the balloting continued.

Each convention featured speeches by Oregon officeholders and candidates. National candidates also appeared, including Robert F. Kennedy, George McGovern, Hubert Humphrey, Jesse Jackson, Jimmy Carter, Jerry Brown, George H. W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, Harold Stassen, Michael Dukakis, and Bill Clinton. After Nelson Rockefeller spoke to the student delegates in 1964, they elected him as their nominee. "We got a lift that day," William E. Walsh, Rockefeller's Oregon campaign chair, told the *Oregonian*. "The spirit of that convention infected Rockefeller so much that he galvanized all of us into enthusiastic efforts," and he went on to win the Oregon primary that year.

In 1968, for the first and only time, there were two model conventions: a convention for Democrats at Sunset High School with only Sunset students involved, and a Republican convention at the Multnomah County Exposition Center for students from several Portland-area high schools. The event at the Expo Center established the model for future conventions, which included high schools primarily from Oregon, Washington, and California and were usually held at the Memorial Coliseum in Portland. Beginning in 1972, several thousand students participated in each convention.

The driving force behind the model conventions was James Barlow, a teacher at Sunset High School (1962–1969) and Aloha High School (1969–2005). Beginning in 1972, he was assisted by Tom Hughes, a teacher at Aloha, and Sunset teacher Bill Presley. Barlow and Hughes took care of the organization and finding speakers, while Presley worked with students on crafting a political platform. Students, trained in an optional evening class called the Metropolitan Congress on World Affairs, took charge of the convention.

Many students found the model conventions to be the best educational experience they had in high school. As *Oregonian* columnist Steve Duin, who participated in the 1972 convention wrote: "The Model Convention...is one of those rare learning experiences...that should be required on every academic transcript....Standing on the Coliseum floor during the five, tumultuous roll-call votes, I felt a part of history."

The model conventions were discontinued after 2004, partly because of Barlow's retirement from teaching, but primarily because the political negotiation and multiple ballots that were highlights of the model conventions ceased to exist when state primaries expanded and nominees were known

before party conventions were held.

## Sources

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