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Democrats Need In Person Convention in 2024 and in Milwaukee

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By Robert Weiner and Ben Lasky

Television's biggest shows from 2020 were celebrated at the Primetime Emmy Awards on Sunday. The 2020 Democratic Convention organizers tried for a nomination in the "outstanding hosted nonfiction series or special" category but did not get one.



Robert S. Weiner

And while it is true that the DNC did a great job putting together a virtual convention amid COVID-19, once the coronavirus is behind us the DNC must return to in-person conventions. Not only are they better for TV, but in the past conventions have been a major vehicle for mobilizing voters not only in the state the convention is in, but nationwide.

The grassroots enthusiasm the convention brings has to return. Republicans made the House and Senate close because they never stopped mobilizing and holding Trump gatherings in person, putting voters at risk. Democrats effectively ceded the ground game for the good of the nation. But they lost important seats.

Conventions don't have to go completely back to the way they were. There should be a hybrid of in-person and the great virtual aspects of the 2020 convention. The hybrid will keep the inspiration of the many live home state displays that did work well on TV. But going fully virtual is a foolish idea.

Trump almost won Wisconsin; Biden won by less than 21,000 votes. Milwaukee remains a prime convention location and deserves to be the host city as much as before.

In June, The Washington Post's Peter Marks wrote, "The convention rewrote the rules for using mass media to galvanize voters and invigorate a campaign." Are we to believe that the campaign was more "invigorated" by Joe Biden and Kamala Harris waving at a screen displaying people sitting in

their houses rather than them waving to thousands of screaming supporters with balloons and confetti falling from the roof?

There is a reason why the DNC and RNC hold most of their conventions in battleground states that they hope to win in the election: It gets the party's message out to voters in the state and draws a huge amount of attention from citizens in the state who might ordinarily be tuned out of political coverage.

In 2012, President Obama moved his acceptance speech in Charlotte, N.C., from a stadium with a capacity of 65,000 to an arena that holds 17,000, because there was a chance that it might rain. Tens of thousands of people with tickets to see Obama speak were out of luck. The president ultimately lost North Carolina by a margin of about 92,000 votes (he won it in 2008 by 14,000.) He didn't lose the state solely because he moved his speech, but it didn't help. Former Charlotte mayor and secretary of transportation, Anthony Foxx, the 2008 convention local organizing chair, told us he agreed with us that it "might well have" cost Obama the state.

In a sick way, Republicans benefitted from the fact that its leaders and lots of their supporters took the pandemic less seriously than Democrats. Republicans continued knocking on doors and holding in-person, mostly unmasked events. Their grassroots campaigning went on as normal while the Democrats' ground game came to a halt.

Republican House candidates did better than expected.

Several Senate seats that Democrats thought they could flip went to Republicans. Democrats thought Susan Collins (R-Maine) was ripe for the picking only to see her retain her seat. Popular Montana governor and presidential candidate Steve Bullock was viewed as a serious challenger to incumbent Senator Steve Daines (R-Mont.). Bullock ended up losing by 10 points. It took a sweep in two Georgia Senate elections two months later to barely take control of the Senate.

Importantly, Biden won by a far narrower margin (20,682 total margin in Wisconsin, 80,555 votes in Pennsylvania and 154,188 votes in Michigan) than he was expected to.

In 2024, Democrats need to get boots back on the ground by both knocking on doors and having an in-person, energized convention in Milwaukee, Emmy nomination or no Emmy nomination.

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