

Making Sense of Party Organization

The Party

One of the first things that completely mystifies new volunteers is why they get a number when they ask where someone is from! Where the heck is SD40 or CD11? Jargon and what at first appear to be byzantine structure and arcane rules are usually there for a reason. Though party organizations differ slightly from state to state and from party to party, this general guide will get you oriented.

The Precinct

Think of a precinct as a neighborhood. It is the smallest unit of party organization (besides the individual volunteer!). If a precinct is running well, precinct chairs and other volunteers will be contacting voters year round, inviting them to events and asking them to volunteer and/or vote for our candidates in election years.

The process of becoming a precinct leader varies between states -for example, if you live in a caucus state, you and your neighbors may gather to elect precinct chairs at the same time your state casts preference ballots and elects party delegates to conventions. Otherwise, your party will have scheduled meetings or conventions for this purpose.

In many states, party platform planks -what the state party “believes in” on all the issues begin as “resolutions” at the same meeting where precinct chairs are elected. The idea for the Peace Corps came from a single person's resolution at a precinct caucus in Minnesota!

Organizing Unit

An organizing unit (OU) in most states (also referred to perhaps as a County Unit or Senate District) is about the size of a suburban city or a rural county. The term Senate District is somewhat misleading because in many states a Senate District may also be responsible for supporting two state House candidates. Senate Districts, made up of unit officers and precinct chairs, may also be supporting candidates for local city offices and school boards in their area, though larger cities and counties may have their own units to endorse city and county candidates and issues.

OU leaders and volunteers organize and train officers, conduct conventions, endorse candidates, raise money and gather volunteers to support the election of their candidates as well as school or city ballot initiatives.

In election years OU conventions get far more interesting! Delegates elected at the precinct level meet to confer party endorsement on candidates for state Senate and House seats. In caucus states this can get quite wild with people running around and screaming. It's watching the proverbial sausage getting made!

OU conventions are often contentious; besides the Senate and House candidates vying for endorsement, delegates also choose other delegates who then attend both the congressional district and state conventions. People supporting a particular candidate or an important issue will hotly compete to become a delegate to those conventions. The congressional or national candidate that earns the most delegates at OU conventions is far more likely to gain an endorsement at the congressional district or state conventions. Delegates running to be delegates to the CD and state conventions in support of *issues* (as opposed to candidates) hope to influence the party platform at the State convention.

Congressional District

Each state gets a specific number of US House Representatives based on population. Each US House Representative represents one Congressional District. A Congressional District party unit ("CD") exists to endorse a candidate for US House at the CD convention and to support them with volunteers and a legally limited amount of money. CDs also coordinate the activities of the OUs within their boundaries. OU chairs and co-chairs are often automatic members of the CD "central committee". CD Central Committee members and officers are also elected at the CD convention.

State Party

Depending on your state, delegates to a CD convention (elected at their SD conventions) are often also delegates to the state convention.

At the State Party Convention delegates endorse candidates for state offices like Governor and Lieutenant Governor, Secretary of State, Attorney General and State Auditor. Candidates for US Senate and for a President ticket are also endorsed at a state convention.

Delegates also elect delegates to the State Central Committee (SCC) which meets *between* conventions to vote on party business. Central Committee delegates usually serve for two years (convention delegates duties are done at the close of the convention). A smaller subset of delegates is elected to the State Executive Committee where they participate in more sensitive party decision making.

Depending on how your state does it, convention delegates or SCC members elect a state party Chair, Vice Chair, Outreach Officer, Treasurer and Secretary. The State Party convention is also

where resolutions introduced at precinct caucuses (and consolidated at SD and CD conventions) are voted on to become "planks" in the party "platform".

The State Party is also responsible for maintaining the party organization at all levels, raising money to support its activities and the activities of lower party units, training volunteers at all levels and setting statewide goals and initiatives for success on election day. The party works closely with the local, statewide and national campaigns and constituencies to plan strategy and spending.

State party employees are few. In Minnesota, for example, the party employs only about ten people, though, in election years, many field coordinators are hired (and interns corralled) to manage day to day voter contact activities.

National Party

The national party endorses candidates for President and Vice president and supports US Senate and House candidates. Delegates to the national party (for Democrats the Democratic National Committee or "DNC") are elected at both the CD and state conventions. National party leadership is elected by the national delegates with the exception of the Chair who, when there is a Democratic President is appointed and generally approved by the DNC.

Got all that? There *will* be a test.

Actually there won't. Yay!