

Priebus intervenes as anti-Trump delegates try to block nominee

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Bloomberg

Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus took the unusual step Thursday of personally intervening in an ongoing session of the national convention's Rules Committee as delegates on the panel work to block Donald Trump's presidential nomination.

Many of the 112 members of the committee went back to their Cleveland hotel rooms or to lunch after the meeting abruptly adjourned with virtually no business accomplished during its morning session.

Sen. Mike Lee of Utah, a political ally of Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas who is on the Rules Committee, was among those meeting with Priebus.

Cruz finished second in the nomination process and may be seeking to use his delegates to try to shape the party for a potential 2020 presidential bid. Concessions to Cruz supporters could help lower the number of anti-Trump votes on the committee as part of the negotiations.

As the meeting with Priebus ended, members of the committee declined to answer questions from reporters. A spokesperson for Priebus didn't immediately respond to questions about Priebus' intent or what was discussed privately.

Paul Manafort, Trump's campaign chairman, told reporters he's not worried about anything going on in the Rules Committee. "We've got the votes," he said.

The committee's chairwoman, former Utah representative Enid Mickelsen, told those gathered that staff members were suffering from printer jams and other technical issues before adjourning around mid-morning. When the committee reconvened about 1 p.m., she said there was more in play than just printing problems.

"Obviously, we did not stand adjourned for three hours because of a jammed copier," she said. "We were approached by a number of members from different groups, proposing different amendments who asked if they could have a period of time to try to work out their differences in hopes that we could then expedite the work of the committee. I don't know what they have or have not decided."

The Rules Committee is expected to meet both Thursday and Friday. Its actions are being watched more closely than usual because rogue delegates are seeking support from the panel for their long-shot bid to try to block Trump from becoming the party's standard-bearer.

Anti-Trump forces want a so-called minority report that could then be presented to the full convention when it convenes Monday.

At the heart of that debate is an appeal to unbind a large proportion of the convention delegates from the results of primaries and caucuses in their states earlier this year. That could allow them to vote for anyone during the convention's first round of nomination voting on the floor.

Trump won more than the 1,237 delegates needed for the nomination with the 13.3 million votes he secured in state contests. Yet organizers of the "Free the Delegates" movement wanted to see the party's rules changed so that

delegates who are bound by election results can “vote their conscience.”

It takes at least 28 votes from the Rules Committee — a quarter of the total 112-member panel — to win a minority report. Unless the full convention were to accept the minority report, the delegates would remain bound. An effort to change the rules could always be initiated from the floor of the convention, but the hurdles for passage there are significantly higher.

There will be 2,472 delegates at the convention. Trump has the backing of 1,542 delegates, including 1,447 who are required by current party rules to vote for him on the first ballot, according to an Associated Press tally.

It's difficult to pin down vote counts ahead of the Rules Committee meetings because delegates can change their minds and are notoriously fickle, said Ben Ginsberg, a former RNC legal counsel, convention veteran, and top aide to 2012 Republican nominee Mitt Romney. There's also uncertainty this year because Trump has not yet named his running mate to reassure delegates, he said.

Even so, Trump has a strong team to whip votes, Ginsberg said on Bloomberg TV's *With All Due Respect* on Wednesday.

“The nominee's whip team is right to worry always and to operate as if the worst could possibly happen,” he said. “But they have a lot of tools.”

Steve Duprey, a longtime RNC member from New Hampshire and member of the Rules Committee, predicted a close vote on meeting the minority report threshold.

“The goal is to make sure that the folks who have differing views on those issues get a fair and full hearing, and hopefully enough of a fair and full hearing that they decide they don't need to file a minority report,” he said. “But we'll see.”

Bill Palatucci, an RNC member from New Jersey backing Trump who is on the convention Rules Committee, said those trying to block the presumptive nominee will have to be “very persuasive” to secure a minority report.

Even if the anti-Trump forces do secure one, Palatucci downplayed the damage it would do to the narrative Trump's campaign wants from the convention. “I don't think it's all that big of a deal,” he said.

One of the other topics expected to be debated by the Rules Committee is the order of states holding the first in presidential nominating primaries and caucuses in coming elections.

Delegates have been talking privately this week about the possibility of Nevada being removed from the first four states that also include Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina and being replaced by another Western state.

Duprey said he also expects the committee will establish a commission to study questions about the calendar.

“Nobody's upset if we have a commission again,” he said. “That's a good result.”

Proponents of Nevada losing its status as the first Western state to vote are using old arguments about past election snafus that have been fixed, said Jordan Ross, a Nevada delegate and member of the Rules Committee.

“Nevada is a swing state and should remain first in the West to assure that the Republican Party has a smooth caucus at that early and critical juncture in the presidential campaign cycle,” Ross said by email.