

# How delegates stripped away their power at the Republican convention

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## Delegates serving on an influential committee moved to strengthen party rules that bind their votes to the presidential candidate that won the primary or caucus in their state. (AP Photo)

**CLEVELAND** — Republican delegates went to extraordinary lengths to protect Donald Trump, neutering their institutional power over of his nomination.

Delegates serving on an influential committee moved, on the eve of the convention that will formally nominate Trump, to strengthen party rules that bind their votes to the presidential candidate that won the primary or caucus in their state.

The rules changes protected Trump from a small but aggressive delegate insurgency intent on derailing his nomination on the convention floor.

Many voters assume that nominations are decided by their votes in the primaries. But it's actually a vote of convention delegates that seals the formal nomination.

Party rules bind delegates to the winner of their state's primary or caucus on the first, and in some cases, second and third ballot on the convention floor. And the rebel delegates, led by Colorado's Kendal Unruh, were pushing to weaken that binding and ease the way for them to vote their conscience.

They were **defeated** in the rules committee of 112 delegates that met last week to set the regulations governing this week's convention. Delegates aligned with the Trump campaign and Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus locked arms and shot down the conscience clause amendment.

But their votes, which cleared the path for a smooth Trump nomination, overshadowed action taken earlier to institutionalize the concept of binding in the GOP rulebook. The changes were presented as clearing up ambiguities about whether binding is permissible under RNC rules.

This underappreciated change reduced the power of delegates over Trump in Cleveland and future nominees at future conventions, codifying the modern view that voters — many of whom are not even Republicans — determine the nomination, not delegates.

Jordan Ross, a Nevada delegate on the rules committee aligned with the Trump campaign, carried the measures to strengthen binding rules.

Ross, the elected constable of Laughlin Township, said in an interview after the rules committee adjourned that he could imagine almost no circumstances in which it would be proper for convention delegates to nominate a candidate other than the presumptive nominee.

That would include, Ross said confidently, a presumptive nominee being indicted for possible criminal activity in between winning the primary and being formally crowned at the convention.

"The voters have a right to decide. In fact, the voters have a right to be wrong, which I contend they were in the last two presidential elections, but that's the privilege of the voters," Ross said. "How much space there is between monkeying with the votes of the people in a primary to just removing people from office because, well, you know, apparently the people made a mistake."

The move to unbind the delegates was fueled by opposition to Trump among a vocal convention minority. Had they managed to win the support of a quarter of the 112-delegate rules panel, their so-called conscience clause proposal would have earned consideration by the full convention on the floor of Quicken Loans Arena.

The odds of the measure advancing beyond that were slim. But it might have been embarrassing for Trump to see his nomination contested at his own convention, and would have created a media spectacle that overshadowed his campaign message. That's why his team and RNC leaders worked so hard to defeat it in the rules committee.

Some proponents of the measure, conceding that opposition to Trump had much to do with it, said there was nevertheless a greater motivation to their attempt to empower the delegates.

Their view is that the defeat of their proposal, combined with the passage of the new strong binding regulations, have diminished the influence of grassroots conservatives, and in the process damaged the Republican Party in ways that will become apparent in the years to come.

Sen. Mike Lee, who has yet to endorse Trump, worked with rebel delegates to try to pass the conscience amendment.

He said in an [interview](#) with the *Washington Examiner* that the rules committee missed an opportunity to strengthen the party and the presumptive nominee's standing with the grassroots by making his nomination at the convention mean something more than just being a formality.

"Having delegates strip away their own power and having the rules committee strip away the power of the delegates to the convention that's about to start, is very unwise," said Lee, a delegate and rules committee member from Utah.

