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In [American](/wiki/United_States) politics, a "**superdelegate**" is a [delegate](/wiki/Delegate) to the [Democratic National Convention](/wiki/Democratic_National_Convention) who is seated automatically and chooses for whom they want to vote. These [Democratic Party](/wiki/Democratic_Party_(United_States)) superdelegates include distinguished party leaders, and elected officials, including all Democratic members of the House and Senate and sitting Democratic governors. Other superdelegates are chosen during the primary season. Democratic superdelegates are free to support any candidate for the presidential nomination. This contrasts with convention "pledged" delegates who are selected based on the [party](/wiki/Political_parties) [primaries](/wiki/Primary_election) and [caucuses](/wiki/Caucus) in each [U.S. state](/wiki/U.S._state), in which voters choose among candidates for the party's [presidential](/wiki/President_of_the_United_States) [nomination](/wiki/Nomination). Because they are free to support anyone they want, superdelegates could potentially swing the results to nominate a presidential candidate who did not receive the majority of votes during the primaries.

At least in name, superdelegates are not involved in the [Republican Party](/wiki/Republican_Party_(United_States)) nomination process. There are delegates to the [Republican National Convention](/wiki/Republican_National_Convention) who are seated automatically, but they are limited to three per state, consisting of the state chairsperson and two district-level committee members. Republican Party superdelegates are obliged to vote for their state's popular vote winner under the rules of the party branch to which they belong.[[1]](#cite_note-1) Although the term *superdelegate* was originally coined and created to describe a type of Democratic delegate, the term has become widely used to describe these delegates in both parties,[[2]](#cite_note-2) even though it is not an official term used by either party.

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## Description[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=1)]

For Democrats, superdelegates fall into three categories based on other positions they hold, and are formally described (in Rule 9.A) as "unpledged party leader and elected official delegates"[[3]](#cite_note-3) (unpledged PLEO delegates) consisting of:

* elected members of the [Democratic National Committee](/wiki/Democratic_National_Committee)
* distinguished party leaders, consisting of current and former presidents, vice presidents, congressional leaders, and DNC chairs
* sitting Democratic governors and members of Congress.

For Republicans, there are three delegates in each state, consisting of the state chairman and two RNC committee members, who are automatic delegates to the national convention. However, according to the RNC communications director Sean Spicer, convention rules obligate these RNC members to vote according to the result of primary elections held in their states, if the state holds a primary.[[1]](#cite_note-1)

## Comparison to pledged delegates[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=2)]

Democratic Party rules distinguish pledged and unpledged delegates. Pledged delegates are selected based on their announced preferences in the contest for the presidential nomination. In the [party](/wiki/Political_party) [primary elections](/wiki/Primary_election) and [caucuses](/wiki/Caucus) in each U.S. state, voters [express their preference](/wiki/First_past_the_post_voting) among the contenders for the party's nomination for [President of the United States](/wiki/President_of_the_United_States). Pledged delegates supporting each candidate are chosen in approximate ratio to their candidate’s share of the vote. They fall into three categories: district-level pledged delegates (usually by [congressional districts](/wiki/Congressional_district)), at-large pledged delegates, and pledged PLEO (Party Leaders and Elected Officials) delegates. In a minority of the states, delegates are legally required to support the candidate to whom they are pledged.[[4]](#cite_note-4) In addition to the states' requirements, the party rules state (Rule 12.J): "Delegates elected to the national convention pledged to a presidential candidate shall in all good conscience reflect the sentiments of those who elected them."[[5]](#cite_note-5) By contrast, the unpledged PLEO delegates (Rule 9.A) are seated without regard to their presidential preferences, solely by virtue of being current or former elected officeholders and party officials. Many of them have chosen to announce endorsements, but they are not bound in any way. They may support any candidate they wish, including one who has dropped out of the presidential race.[[6]](#cite_note-6) Unpledged PLEO delegates should not be confused with pledged PLEOs. Under Rule 9.C, the pledged PLEO slots are allocated to candidates based on the results of the primaries and caucuses.[[5]](#cite_note-5) Another difference between pledged PLEOs and unpledged PLEOs is that there is a fixed number of pledged PLEO slots for each state, while the number of unpledged PLEOs can change during the campaign. Pledged PLEO delegates are not generally considered superdelegates.

## Origins[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=3)]

After the [1968 Democratic National Convention](/wiki/1968_Democratic_National_Convention), at which pro-[Vietnam war](/wiki/Vietnam_war) liberal [Hubert Humphrey](/wiki/Hubert_Humphrey) was nominated for the presidency despite not running in a single [primary election](/wiki/Primary_election), the Democratic Party made changes in its delegate selection process to correct what was seen as "illusory" control of the nomination process by primary voters.<ref name=Marcetic21>Branko Marcetic, "The Secret History of Super Delegates," *In These Times,* vol. 40, no. 6 (June 2016), pg. 21.</ref> A commission headed by [South Dakota](/wiki/South_Dakota) Senator [George McGovern](/wiki/George_McGovern) and [Minnesota](/wiki/Minnesota) Representative [Donald M. Fraser](/wiki/Donald_M._Fraser) met in 1969 and 1970 to make the composition of the Democratic Party's nominating convention less subject to control by party leaders and more responsive to the votes cast in primary elections.

The rules implemented by the [McGovern-Fraser Commission](/wiki/McGovern-Fraser_Commission) shifted the balance of power to primary elections and caucuses, mandating that all delegates be chosen via mechanisms open to all party members.[[7]](#cite_note-7) As a result of this change the number of primaries more than doubled over the next three presidential election cycles, from 17 in 1968 to 35 in 1980.[[7]](#cite_note-7) Despite the radically increased level of primary participation, with 32 million voters taking part in the selection process by 1980, the Democrats proved largely unsuccessful at the ballot box, with the 1972 presidential campaign of McGovern and the 1980 re-election campaign of [Jimmy Carter](/wiki/Jimmy_Carter) resulting in landslide defeats.[[7]](#cite_note-7) Democratic Party affiliation skidded from 41 percent of the electorate at the time of the McGovern-Fraser Commission report to just 31 percent in the aftermath of the 1980 electoral debacle.[[7]](#cite_note-7) Further soul-searching took place among party leaders, who argued that the pendulum had swung too far in the direction of primary elections over insider decision-making, with one May 1981 California white paper declaring that the Democratic Party had "lost its leadership, collective vision and ties with the past," resulting in the nomination of unelectable candidates.<ref name=Marcetic22>Marcetic, "The Secret History of Super Delegates," pg. 22.</ref> A new 70-member commission headed by [Governor of North Carolina](/wiki/Governor_of_North_Carolina) [Jim Hunt](/wiki/Jim_Hunt) was appointed to further refine the Democratic Party's nomination process, attempting to balance the wishes of rank-and-file Democrats with the collective wisdom of party leaders and to thereby avoid the nomination of insurgent candidates exemplified by the liberal McGovern or the anti-Washington conservative Carter and lessening the potential influence of single-issue politics in the selection process.[[8]](#cite_note-8) Following a series of meetings held from August 1981 to February 1982, the Hunt Commission issued a report which recommended the set aside of unelected and unpledged delegate slots for Democratic members of Congress and for state party chairs and vice chairs (so-called "superdelegates").[[8]](#cite_note-8) With the original Hunt plan, superdelegates were to represent 30% of all delegates to the national convention, but when it was finally implemented by the [Democratic National Committee](/wiki/Democratic_National_Committee) for the 1984 election, the number of superdelegates was set 14%. Over time this percentage has gradually increased, until by 2008 the percentage stands at approximately 20% of total delegates to the Democratic Party nominating convention.[[9]](#cite_note-9)

## Superdelegates in practice[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=4)]

### Election of 1984[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=5)]

In 1984, only state party chairs and vice chairs were guaranteed superdelegate status. The remaining spots were divided two ways. The Democrats in Congress were allowed to select up to 60% of their members to fill some of these spots. The remaining positions were left to the state parties to fill with priority given to governors and big-city mayors.

In the [1984 election](/wiki/United_States_presidential_election,_1984), the major contenders for the presidential nomination were [Gary Hart](/wiki/Gary_Hart) and [Walter Mondale](/wiki/Walter_Mondale). Each won some primaries and caucuses. Mondale was only slightly ahead of Hart in the total number of votes cast but won the support of almost all superdelegates and became the nominee.<ref name=Berman>[Template:Cite news](/wiki/Template:Cite_news)</ref>

### Election of 1988[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=6)]

In 1988, this process was simplified. Democrats in Congress were now allowed to select up to 80% of their members. All Democratic National Committee members and all Democratic governors were given superdelegate status. This year also saw the addition of the *distinguished party leader* category (although former DNC chairs were not added to this category until 1996, and former House and Senate minority leaders were not added until 2000). In 1992 was the addition of a category of unpledged "add-ons", a fixed number of spots allocated to the states, intended for other party leaders and elected officials not already covered by the previous categories. Finally, beginning in 1996, all Democratic members of Congress were given superdelegate status.[[10]](#cite_note-10) The superdelegates have not always prevailed, however. In the Democratic primary phase of the [2004 election](/wiki/United_States_presidential_election,_2004), [Howard Dean](/wiki/Howard_Dean) acquired an early lead in delegate counts by obtaining the support of a number of superdelegates before even the first primaries were held.[[11]](#cite_note-11) Nevertheless, [John Kerry](/wiki/John_Kerry) defeated Dean in a succession of primaries and caucuses and won the nomination.

In 1988, a study found that superdelegates and delegates selected through the primary and caucus process are not substantively different in terms of viewpoints on issues from each other. However, superdelegates are more likely to prefer candidates with Washington experience than outsider candidates.[[12]](#cite_note-12)

### Election of 2008[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=7)]

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At the [2008 Democratic National Convention](/wiki/2008_Democratic_National_Convention), the superdelegates made up approximately one-fifth of the total number of delegates. The closeness of the race between the leading contenders, [Hillary Clinton](/wiki/Hillary_Clinton) and [Barack Obama](/wiki/Barack_Obama), led to speculation that the superdelegates would play a decisive role in selecting the nominee, a prospect that caused unease among some Democratic Party leaders.[[13]](#cite_note-13) Obama, however, won a majority of the pledged delegates[[14]](#cite_note-14) and of the superdelegates, and thus clinched the Democratic presidential nomination by June.[[15]](#cite_note-15) At the [2008 Democratic National Convention](/wiki/2008_Democratic_National_Convention), superdelegates cast approximately 823.5 votes, with fractions arising because superdelegates from [Michigan](/wiki/Michigan), [Florida](/wiki/Florida), and [Democrats Abroad](/wiki/Democrats_Abroad) are entitled to half a vote each. Of the superdelegates' votes, 745 were from unpledged PLEO delegates and 78.5 were from unpledged add-on delegates.

There was no fixed number of unpledged PLEO delegates. The number was allowed to change during the campaign as particular individuals gained or lost qualification under a particular category. The unpledged PLEO delegates were: all Democratic members of the [United States Congress](/wiki/United_States_Congress), Democratic [governors](/wiki/Governor_(United_States)), members of the [Democratic National Committee](/wiki/Democratic_National_Committee), "[a]ll former Democratic Presidents, all former Democratic Vice Presidents, all former Democratic Leaders of the U.S. Senate, all former Democratic Speakers of the U.S. House of Representatives and Democratic Minority Leaders, as applicable, and all former Chairs of the Democratic National Committee."

There was an exception, however, for otherwise qualified individuals who endorse another party’s candidate for President; under Rule 9.A, they lose their superdelegate status.[[5]](#cite_note-5) (In 2008, Senator [Joe Lieberman](/wiki/Joe_Lieberman) of [Connecticut](/wiki/Connecticut) endorsed Republican [John McCain](/wiki/John_McCain), which, according to the chairwoman of the Connecticut Democratic Party, resulted in his disqualification as a superdelegate.[[16]](#cite_note-16) Lieberman's status had, however, previously been questioned because, although he was a registered Democratic voter and caucused with the Democrats, he won re-election as the candidate of the [Connecticut for Lieberman](/wiki/Connecticut_for_Lieberman) Party and was listed as an "Independent Democrat".[[17]](#cite_note-17) The count for Connecticut's delegates in the state party's delegate selection plan, issued before his endorsement of McCain, reportedly excluded Lieberman,[[18]](#cite_note-18)[Template:Unreliable source?](/wiki/Template:Unreliable_source?) and he was not included on at least one list of PLEO delegates prepared before his endorsement.[[19]](#cite_note-19)) In the end he was not a superdelegate and did not attend the Democratic Convention, he was instead a speaker at the Republican Convention.[[20]](#cite_note-20) The unpledged add-on delegate slots for the various states totaled 81, but the initial rule had been that the five unpledged add-on delegates from Michigan and Florida would not be seated, leaving 76 unpledged add-on delegates.[[21]](#cite_note-21) Michigan and Florida were being penalized for violating Democratic Party rules by holding their primaries too early.

The exact number of superdelegates changed several times because of events. For example, the number decreased as a result of the death of Representative [Tom Lantos](/wiki/Tom_Lantos), the move from Maine to Florida of former Maine Governor [Kenneth M. Curtis](/wiki/Kenneth_M._Curtis),[[22]](#cite_note-22)[Template:Unreliable source?](/wiki/Template:Unreliable_source?) and the resignation of [New York Governor](/wiki/Governor_of_New_York) [Eliot Spitzer](/wiki/Eliot_Spitzer). (Because New York's new Governor, [David Paterson](/wiki/David_Paterson), was an at-large member of the Democratic National Committee, he was already a superdelegate before becoming Governor.[[23]](#cite_note-23)) On the other hand, the number increased when special elections for the House of Representatives were won by Democrats [Bill Foster](/wiki/Bill_Foster_(Illinois_politician)), [André Carson](/wiki/André_Carson), [Jackie Speier](/wiki/Jackie_Speier), and [Travis Childers](/wiki/Travis_Childers).[[24]](#cite_note-24)[Template:Unreliable source?](/wiki/Template:Unreliable_source?)

The biggest change came on May 31 as a result of the meeting of the national party's Rules and Bylaws Committee, which lessened the penalty initially imposed on Michigan and Florida. The party had excluded all delegates (including superdelegates) from either state. The Rules and Bylaws Committee voted to seat all these superdelegates (as well as the pledged delegates from those states) but with half a vote each.[[25]](#cite_note-25) That action added 55 superdelegates with 27.5 votes. The total number of superdelegates could continue to change until the beginning of the convention (Call to the Convention Section IV(C)(2)). On August 24, the Democratic Party, at the request of Obama, awarded delegates from Michigan and Florida full voting rights.[[26]](#cite_note-26) Pledged delegates from state caucuses and primaries eventually numbered 3,573, casting 3,566 votes, resulting in a total number of delegate votes of 4,419. A candidate needed a majority of that total, or 2,209, to win the nomination. Superdelegates accounted for approximately one fifth (19.6%) of all votes at the convention and delegates chosen in the Democratic caucuses and primaries accounted for approximately four-fifths (80.4%) of the Democratic convention delegates.[[27]](#cite_note-27)[[28]](#cite_note-28) At the convention, Obama won 3,188.5 delegate votes and Hillary Clinton won 1010.5 with 1 abstention and 218 delegates not voting.[[29]](#cite_note-29) [*The Politico*](/wiki/The_Politico) found that about half of the superdelegates were white men, compared to 28% of the Democratic primary electorate.[[30]](#cite_note-30) In the Republican Party, as in the Democratic Party, members of the party’s national committee automatically become delegates without being pledged to any candidate. In 2008, there were 123 members of the [Republican National Committee](/wiki/Republican_National_Committee) among the total of 2,380 delegates to the [2008 Republican National Convention](/wiki/2008_Republican_National_Convention).[[28]](#cite_note-28) There are three RNC delegates (the national committeeman, national committeewoman, and state party chair) for each state.[[31]](#cite_note-31)

### Election of 2016[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=8)]

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On February 12, 2016, [Debbie Wasserman Schultz](/wiki/Debbie_Wasserman_Schultz), chair of the [Democratic National Committee](/wiki/Democratic_National_Committee), was asked by [CNN's](/wiki/CNN) [Jake Tapper](/wiki/Jake_Tapper), "What do you tell voters who are new to the process who say this makes them feel like it's all rigged?" Schultz's response was, "Unpledged delegates exist really to make sure that party leaders and elected officials don't have to be in a position where they are running against grass-roots activists. We are, as a Democratic Party, really highlight and emphasize inclusiveness and diversity at our convention, and so we want to give every opportunity to grass-roots activists and diverse committed Democrats to be able to participate, attend and be a delegate at the convention. And so we separate out those unpledged delegates to make sure that there isn't competition between them."[[32]](#cite_note-32) This statement was hailed by Clinton supporters as a wise policy to maintain steady, experienced governance, and derided by [Bernie Sanders'](/wiki/Bernie_Sanders) supporters as the establishment thwarting the will of the people.[[33]](#cite_note-33) In response to criticism from a Sanders supporter about his continued support of Hillary Clinton despite her loss in the 2016 Vermont primary, former Governor and superdelegate [Howard Dean](/wiki/Howard_Dean) controversially took to [Twitter](/wiki/Twitter) to respond that "Super delegates don't 'represent people.' I'm not elected by anyone. I'll do what I think is right for the country."[[34]](#cite_note-34)

## Criticism[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=9)]

[Susan Estrich](/wiki/Susan_Estrich) argued that these delegates would have more power than other delegates because of their greater freedom to vote as they wish beginning with the first ballot.[[35]](#cite_note-35) Delegates chosen in primaries and caucuses do not precisely reflect the votes cast, but Democratic party rules require [proportional allocation](/wiki/Proportional_representation) rather than winner-take-all.[[36]](#cite_note-36)

## References[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=10)]

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## External links[[edit](/index.php?title=(none)&action=edit&section=11)]

[Template:Wikiquote](/wiki/Template:Wikiquote)

* [Superdelegate Transparency Project](http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Portal:Superdelegate_Transparency_Project) Superdelegate Transparency Project, a wiki with details of the superdelegates
* [Democratic Convention Watch](http://www.democraticconventionwatch.com/) - lists which superdelegates have and have not endorsed a candidate
* ["Delegate Selection Rules for the 2008 Democratic National Convention"](http://s3.amazonaws.com/apache.3cdn.net/3e5b3bfa1c1718d07f_6rm6bhyc4.pdf) - official Democratic Party rules (note: this is a redirect from the link www.democrats.org/page/-/dem\_convention/rules.pdf, on <http://www.demconvention.com/how-to-become-a-delegate/>)

[Category:United States presidential nominating conventions](/wiki/Category:United_States_presidential_nominating_conventions) [Category:Organizational structure of political parties](/wiki/Category:Organizational_structure_of_political_parties)