

Agenda for RNC Rules Committee: Do Nothing

With a brawling convention in the offing, GOP pooh-bahs plan a 'plain vanilla' meeting to stay above the fray.



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Despite a brokered convention looming this summer, along with the possibility of a fractured party and big election losses this November, the Republican National Committee appears, for now, to have settled on a two-word plan: Do nothing.

“We want to avoid the appearance that the RNC is any way heavy-handed,” said Peter Feaman, Florida’s member of the RNC’s powerful Rules Committee, of next week’s meeting. “I think the Rules Committee is going to disappoint a lot of people, but it’s going to be a plain vanilla meeting. By design.”

So while the RNC will discuss whether its chair and vice chair should run

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as a ticket in internal elections, and whether the current early-voting states should maintain an exclusive hold on that privilege, members will conspicuously not talk about who can be nominated for president at the July convention in Cleveland.

“It’s very important that since we’re running it, it’s clear that we’re not favoring anybody,” Feaman said.

If the country’s top Republicans seem anxious about their most pressing issue, that’s because they are. The three-letter acronym RNC has become a four-letter word, at least for significant portions of the party’s voting base. Donald Trump, the party’s leader in delegates, has recently incorporated this sentiment into his campaign message: The Republican Party is trying to “steal” his victory through rules that allow activists loyal to Sen. Ted Cruz to take Trump’s delegate slots.

“This is not a democracy like we’re supposed to have,” Trump complained at a rally in Albany, New York, this week, promising changes once he’s elected. “We’re not going to have rigged elections in the Republican Party anymore.”

His new top campaign official, meanwhile, has likened Cruz’s efforts to “gestapo tactics,” while a former staffer is organizing a “nonviolent march on Cleveland” during convention week, and has promised to reveal which hotels the delegates are staying in to let protesters make their views known in person.

The tense atmosphere is making impossible any early resolution of the RNC’s “Rule 40(b),” which requires a candidate to win the majority of delegates in eight states to be entered into nomination for the presidency. If that threshold remains at the convention, it would almost certainly eliminate all candidates other than Trump and Cruz, neither of whom has the support of the party establishment. The rule was adopted in 2012 by supporters of that year’s nominee, Mitt Romney, as a way to shut down backers of Ron Paul.

“The establishment, such as it is, put themselves in a pickle,” said the RNC Rules member from California, Shawn Steel, who added that this year’s race, despite the heartburn that it’s causing, does have its merits. “It’s kind of unsettling. Kind of exciting. But completely different. ... California has not been in a primary of any consequence since Ronald Reagan.”

Many Republicans who see both Trump and Cruz as certain losers to Democratic front-runner Hillary Clinton hope that Rule 40(b) can be

modified to allow for Ohio Gov. John Kasich or someone not running to be nominated—perhaps after the primaries are finished on June 7.

Even that delaying strategy, though, has its opponents, including Georgia's RNC Rules Committee member Randy Evans. "I don't believe in changing the rules of the game in the middle of the game," he said. "We've played seven innings, and we shouldn't change the rules for the last two innings."

While the RNC Rules Committee will likely craft a package of recommendations, the actual convention rules will be drafted and adopted by the Convention Rules Committee, an organizationally distinct panel but one that Evans and other RNC Rules Committee members hope to serve on as well.

And Evans, for one, intends to lobby the Convention Rules Committee to leave the eight-state requirement in place—and he's confident he can get the group to agree. "I'm pretty good at whipping votes," he said.

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