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The GOP convention is going to be a hot mess

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As we watch GOP strategists scramble to try to find a way around Donald Trump, tossing around the idea of running a third-party candidate, it is begging for comparisons to one of the oddest fights of all time: The Democratic Convention of 1924.

That convention saw a prolonged fight over the direction and focus of the Democratic Party and it marked the end of the Progressive movement. The fight was between the urban-focused anti-prohibition “wets” led by their hero N.Y. Governor Al Smith, the first Catholic to seriously seek the nomination, and the “drys,” headed by former Treasury Secretary William McAdoo, the son-in-law of Woodrow Wilson. The Catholic angle played a very large role in the battle, especially since the Ku Klux Klan, then a very powerful and growing force in politics, endorsed McAdoo and held a “Klanbake” before the convention.

The result from that 1924 convention fight was the disastrous nomination of a third choice, John W. Davis, as the Democratic party’s candidate. Davis, who lost to Republican incumbent Calvin Coolidge in the general election, is perhaps best known for being the lead attorney on the wrong side of the 20th Century’s most famous Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education*.

In his book “The 103rd Ballot” (referencing the record 103 ballots it took to nominate a presidential candidate at that 1924 convention), Penn State history professor Robert Murray notes that, throughout the entire 1920s, it was the Democratic Party that never came close to winning the presidency or anywhere near control of either branch of Congress. Republicans had their disagreements but, except for a few outliers such as progressive Senator Robert W. LaFollete, the party was cohesive and relatively uniform in their political positions, agreeing to ignore the more touchy ones. The Democrats, meanwhile, had wide disagreements on prohibition, nativism, isolationism and the rise of urban centers and the decline of the rural areas. These issues were debated ad nauseam within the confines of the Democratic Party.

Today, the Republican party has a firm control on the state levels as well as in Congress but they have not been able to translate this success to the presidential level, losing the popular vote in five of the last six races. But what Donald Trump’s candidacy has shown is that, on a very basic level — one that was not apparent until this year — the party is being torn apart over

its stances on the basic issues of the day, such as immigration, free trade and foreign policy. The Democrats have their internal struggles, but there is a much more uniform stance on the issues – the practical differences between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders is barely noticeable compared to the chasms between front-runner Donald Trump and the other Republican candidates.

If 1924 is any road map, the Republicans have a very tough road ahead, regardless of whether their nominee is decided on the first ballot or the 103rd. It took Democrats a long time to recover from that 1924 debacle — it took the Great Depression to bring them back into power with a new, modified form of Progressivism.

A look at 1924 may give any Republican chills. But they can take from it one cold, comforting fact: Murray portrays one man as the hero of the convention, who stood out amid the clamor to show a way forward in the future. That guy was Franklin Delano Roosevelt. But it took eight years and a total economic collapse, before he eventually managed to, temporarily, repair the breaches in the party and lead the Democrats out of the political wilderness.

The Republicans may want to start praying for a similar, and much quicker, revelation in Cleveland.

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