

The Primary Problem

Editoriale

This is shaping up to be an ugly presidential primary season, and the candidates have not even started getting ugly yet. The Democratic Party is vowing to strip Florida and Michigan of their delegates if those states insist on pushing their primaries up to January. The Republicans are also threatening to take delegates from Florida and Michigan, along with three other states. Iowa and New Hampshire, whose laws require them to vote before other states, may respond to the interlopers by moving their own primaries into early January, or even late 2007.

The presidential primary system is broken. For years, the nominating process has unfolded in an orderly, if essentially unfair, way. The schedule has worked very nicely for early-voting states, which have had a steady stream of would-be presidents knocking on their doors, making commitments on issues like the Iowa full-employment program, also known as the ethanol subsidy. The losers have been states like New York and California, which have often gotten to vote only when the contests were all but decided. Issues that matter to them, like mass transportation, have suffered.

There have long been calls for reform, but the national parties have been reluctant to tinker with the system. The Democrats made a small change this time around, allowing Nevada and South Carolina to join Iowa and New Hampshire in selecting delegates before Feb. 5, the end of a protected window for early-state voting. The parties, however, have resisted more ambitious overhauls that have been proposed.

The states are fighting back. Many have pushed their primaries up to Feb. 5, the first day that the non-early-voting states are allowed to schedule their primaries. As a result, Tuesday, Feb. 5, 2008 — when primaries are scheduled in California, New York, Illinois, New Jersey and many other states — is being called not just Super Tuesday, but Super Duper Tuesday.

A few states are going further, openly defying the Feb. 5 cutoff. The highest-profile fight has been over Florida, which has scheduled its primary for Jan. 29. The Democratic National Committee is insisting that Florida adopt a process that complies with its rules, perhaps by turning the Jan. 29 vote into a “beauty contest” and choosing actual delegates later. The Republican Party has taken a similar stand.

The national parties are right to take a hard line. If there is anything worse than a bad primary schedule, it is an utterly chaotic one. If the rules are not enforced, it encourages candidates to game the system. Some of the support for pushing Florida’s voting forward reportedly comes from backers of Rudolph Giuliani and Hillary Clinton, who are both expected to do well in the state. The rules should be determined before it is clear which candidate they would benefit.

A Wild West approach could also make the primary season absurdly early. States could keep leapfrogging backward over each other until their primaries were scheduled in the winter, or even fall, of the year before the general election. No one except political professionals would benefit from dragging on the campaign so long, or selecting the nominee so far in advance.

There have been plenty of predictions that Howard Dean, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, and his Republican counterparts won’t carry out their threat to take away delegates, out of fear of offending voters in the affected states. Stripping delegates is not an ideal solution. Still, the national parties are right about the importance of the rules, and should hold firm.

The states bucking the system are right about a larger point: the nominating process must be changed. An ideal system would start slowly enough that candidates who are not well-known or well-financed can score some early victories or at least show well. At the same time, it would allow larger states to participate early enough in the process that their voters could play a significant role

in choosing the nominees. It would spread out primary days over a long enough time that a true campaign could emerge, rather than the near-national primary that is likely to occur next Feb. 5.

Many worthy reform proposals are circulating. One calls for dividing the nation into four regions and having them vote in sequence: one in March, another in April, and the last two in May and June. In future elections, the regions would vote in a different order. Unfortunately, a leading version of this plan calls for Iowa and New Hampshire to keep voting first. Another appealing idea, the “American Plan,” starts with small states and moves onto larger ones, so long-shot candidates can build momentum, but it does an especially good job of ensuring that voters from all states have a reasonable chance of voting early in the primary season.

The two parties should begin a discussion of the best reform proposals now, and plan on having a new system in place for 2012. The presidential nominating process is too important to American democracy to be allowed to descend into gamesmanship and chaos.