Regional Primaries: Past and Future

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The lack of a rhyme or reason to the presidential primary and caucus calendar and problems associated with increasing consolidation of primaries on earlier dates (Mayer and Busch 2004) has led to renewed interest in regional primaries. Regional primaries attempt to create some order to the nomination calendar by grouping primaries by geographic regions: Western States hold primaries on one day, Midwestern States on another date, and so on. Each group of primaries is scheduled at intervals ranging from two weeks to a month, depending upon the plan. Most plans call for rotation of regions across election years. Some plans retain early slots for Iowa and New Hampshire, one plan would select other small states to start the nomination calendar (Sabato 2006), while still other scenarios have no lead-off primaries. Nevertheless, all plans evoke the same set of questions: 1) what are the advantages and disadvantages of regional primaries, and 2) how likely are they to be adopted?

Current and Past Proposals for Regional Primaries

The idea of grouping primaries by region is not new. The first congressional proposal for regional primaries was introduced by Robert Packwood (R-OR) in 1972. Since that time, 40 more bills have been submitted. In the 110th Congress, the Regional Presidential Primary and Caucus Act of 2007 is sponsored in the Senate (S. 1905) by Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) and in the House of Representatives (H.R. 3487) by Alcee L. Hastings (D-FL). A second House bill (H.R. 1523) sponsored by Sander Leven (D-MI) is called the Interregional Presidential Primary and Caucus Act of 2007. A hearing on the Senate bill was held by the Rules and Administration Committee on September 19, 2007.

That bill calls for four regional primaries on the first Tuesdays in March through June. A lottery system would establish the order of the regions, and Iowa and New Hampshire retain their lead slots.

The National Association of Secretaries of States (NASS) also has a similar plan for a nationwide system of regional primaries. Their plan, first debated in 1996, calls for four regions, rotated across years, and keeps Iowa and New Hampshire as early events. Their plan was included as a recommendation in the Carter-Baker Commission on Federal Election Reform (Appleman 2007) and has been endorsed by the Council of State Governments. Larry Sabato's (2006) plan uses a lottery at the beginning of each election year to determine the order of the regions and to select two small states for early primaries. Each region would be assigned a specific month for nomination events, though a state within the region could select any date throughout the month for its primary or caucus.

Groups of states, on their own, also have attempted to develop regional primaries. The most successful, in terms of coordinating primaries on a single date, was the 1988 southern regional primary held on March 8. Efforts for a southern regional primary began in 1972 but were not entirely successful until 1988. In that year, fourteen Southern and Border States coordinated their primaries on a date also used by six nonsouthern states for their primaries or caucuses. The Southern Legislative Conference was the key player in coordinating passage of laws across the southern states, but the plan also was endorsed by the Southern Governors' Association and the Democratic Leadership Council (Norrander 1992; Stanley and Hadley 1987). Democratic leaders in the South hoped that the regional primary format would force candidates and the media to pay more

attention to southern issues. Southern Democratic Party leaders also hoped that the regional primary format would lead to the nomination of a more moderate presidential candidate. Yet, three candidates, Al Gore, Michael Dukakis and Jesse Jackson, split the vote on Super Tuesday, and a northeastern "liberal" candidate eventually won the nomination. On the Republican side, the Southern Republican Primary Project was created to encourage voters to participate in Republican primaries on Super Tuesday with hopes that these same voters would continue to support Republican candidates in the fall. As for the outcome of the 1988 southern Republican primaries, Vice President George H.W. Bush swept the day, in part due to President Ronald Reagan's popularity in the South. Bush's Super Tuesday victories helped Bush cement his nomination. Disappointment with the results and costs of the regional primary led a number of the southern state legislatures to withdraw from the regional primary format in subsequent years.

Attempts have been made to put together a Rocky Mountain regional primary since the 1990s, led first by Colorado Governor Roy Romer (D) and later by Governors Bill Richardson (D-NM) and Jon Huntsman (R-UT). In 2007, the plan called for the eight Mountain States to coordinate their delegate selection events on February 5. The plan won the endorsement of the Western Governor's Association, and five states adopted the uniform date. However, the selection of Nevada, by the Democratic National Committee's Commission on Presidential Nomination Timing and Scheduling, to hold an early caucus thwarted efforts for a regional primary for 2008 (Appleman 2007). Meanwhile the Rocky Mountain States are just five of the 22 set to hold primaries or caucuses on Super Duper Tuesday.

Arguments for Regional Primaries

Regional primaries would rationalize the presidential nomination calendar. The number of primary election dates would be limited, and events would be evenly spaced across the spring of each election year. Advocates point to benefits for candidates, states and voters.

Consolidating primaries and caucuses into regions would allow candidates to concentrate their campaigns into smaller geographic areas, instead of continually crisscrossing the nation. Confining campaigning to one region at a time would presumably led to less wear and tear on the candidates and their staff, reduce the number of cross-country plane trips, and allow for more efficient television advertising (as most media markets that crossed state lines would fall within the same region). Regional primaries also would present a guaranteed schedule to candidates. No more would candidates have to guess if one state would be moving its primary ahead and whether the national parties would recognize these schedule changes. Longer time spans between each set of regional primaries would allow candidates to recover, if they did less well than expected in a prior event, or give them time to capitalize on successful prior outcomes. For example, Howard Dean began to bounce back from the Iowa loss and election night "yell" within a few days, but without sufficient time to fully recover before the New Hampshire primary. Likewise, John McCain did not have time to fully capitalize on his New Hampshire victory, being unable to obtain and then use the additional campaign funds that a primary victory could produce, before having to contest the South Carolina primary. Finally, some regional primary advocates argue that a saner

campaign schedule would encourage better candidates to enter the presidential nomination contest.

Advocates of regional primaries in the states often argue that the format will force candidates to address issues of concern to each region or the nation rather than catering solely to the issues of one or two states. More states would have a voice in the selection of the presidential nomination, as the contests would not be decided by a few early primaries. Even if Iowa and New Hampshire retained their lead-off slots, only the weakest candidates would not attempt to remain in the race until the first or second round of regional events. Election officials also would benefit from the regional primary format. The dates of each state's primary would be known in advance, giving election officials a firm schedule in which to obtain and train election site workers, and to prepare ballots and voter rosters.

An extended contest for the presidential nominations across most if not all of the regions would result in fewer voters being locked out of the nomination decisions. The current front-loaded system results in a nominee being chosen by mid-March, and perhaps earlier in 2008. Voters in states with later primaries have no voice in the nominations. As a result, turnout is lower in these states (Atkeson and Maestas 2004). Greater overall satisfaction with the structure might even lead to an across-the-board turnout in presidential primaries.

Criticisms of Regional Primaries

One of the dominant concerns with the regional primary format is the impression that the region that goes first will have undue influence on the selection of each year's

nominee. To balance out this bias, rotation across the years is often included in the plans. The foremost concern is that regions affect the fates of particular candidates. Regional voting patterns do occur in the primaries (Mayer 2007; Norrander 1993). Yet, successful presidential candidates have to win outside their own region. Gore in 1988 skipped the early states (where he was doing poorly) to concentrate on the southern regional primary. Yet after doing well in the South, he had no friendly territory in which to continue to win.

For the regional primary format to work, candidates will have to change their behavior and remain in the contest across most if not all of the regions. Yet, candidates currently withdraw quickly when encountering less than expected outcomes (Haynes et al. 2004; Norrander 2006). The regional primary format does not guarantee that candidates will stay active throughout the nomination season. On the other hand, if early rounds merely eliminate the weakest candidates, and two or more stronger candidates remain in the contest for the later rounds of the regional primaries, voters in many states would have a say on the nominations. A third scenario could produce a stalemated convention. If two candidates remained in the contest throughout all the regions and evenly split the vote, the modern political convention comprised of delegates strongly committed to their own candidates would have a hard time reaching a consensus. The Democratic Party does have their Super Delegates, but these elected officials typically endorse a candidate well before the convention.

Candidate strategy will still dictate that each spends an enormous amount of time and effort on the first events. If a regional primary plan retains Iowa and New Hampshire as the lead-off states, than candidates will continue to concentrate on these states. If the regional primary excludes early states and only contains four to five regions, each of

these areas will be too large for the retail politics now evidenced in Iowa and New Hampshire. Most would agree that face-to-face meetings between the candidates and real voters are a good component of the current system. Because of the large size of each region, candidate strategy will consist of television advertising and tarmac campaigning.

The regional primary format is unlikely to change the nature of the candidate field. The slightly more rational campaign schedule is unlikely to draw in any more candidates than the current system. Candidates would still have to juggle campaigning and fundraising with professional (e.g., votes in Congress) and personal lives. And these juggled schedules would still be necessary for the pre-election as well as the election year. Further, there is no evidence that the current system dissuades candidates who would run in a regional primary format. In fact, the current system (and a regional primary system) may already have too many candidates. Voters are overwhelmed by such choices. Debates between numerous candidates lead to confusion over too many answers (Yawn, Ellsworth, Beatty and Kahn 1998). Large candidate fields also produce idiosyncratic outcomes. For example, three religiously conservative candidates on the Republican side could lose to a sole moderate candidate. A few more votes in Iowa in 2004 for Edwards, and a few less for Kerry, would certainly have altered the dynamics of that year's Democratic nomination.

Dividing the nation into four regions still produces large geographic areas that group together states of varying sizes and interests. The fate of the small states is often a concern of regional primary critics. A western regional primary may become dominated by California and an eastern primary by New York. Four regions are too large and too diverse, and neighboring states often have conflicts as well as similar interest. Most

candidates would be likely to divide up a region into more manageable components. They would search for their own niches, as Dukakis did on Super Tuesday 1988. Dukakis campaign in areas of Florida with northern retirees and utilized his Spanish-speaking abilities to court Latino voters in Texas. Each state or media market may be courted by only one, maybe two, candidates, rather than seeing a competitive race across the entire roster of candidates,.

Regional primaries will cost states money to conduct a separate election. Some states still prefer to consolidate their presidential primary with their statewide primaries, which requires a late spring primary date. State legislators care more about their own primaries than their state's influence on presidential politics. A March regional primary may be too early for state legislative primaries. A June date would be too late to use the caucus structure, which requires time for subsequent mid-level and state conventions. Thus, a rotating regional primary system would most likely force all states to adopt primaries rather than caucuses, and to separate the presidential primaries from other state-level primaries. Both actions will infringe on state budgets. In the past, state legislatures have been willing to forgo presidential primaries when state budgets are strapped, as was the case in 2004 when several legislatures eliminated presidential primaries. Partisan politics also comes into play. In Arizona in 2004, a Republican controlled legislature voted to eliminate the presidential primary (which would have no competition with President Bush's renomination a certainty), leading the Democratic governor to veto the legislation.

Perhaps the best source of information on the reactions of state legislators to the regional primary format is to look at what happened to the southern regional primary

states. Only half of the states remained in the format for the next election cycle. Missouri found the cost of switching from party caucuses to a state-sponsored primary too high and the switched did not helped its favorite son, Richard Gephardt. Turnout in the new Virginia primary also was not that high. Thus, both Missouri and Virginia returned to the caucus format after Super Tuesday, though both eventually switched back to presidential primaries in later election cycles. Four states (Arkansas, Alabama, Kentucky, North Carolina) returned to later calendar dates to allow for coordination with statewide primaries, to give state legislators the later primary date they preferred for their own reelection, or to increase turnout in general or by a desired group. Meanwhile, Maryland moved the date of its 1992 primary forward one week, hoping to increase its clout; and in 1996, Georgia and the Republicans in Louisiana also tested earlier dates. Thus, the southern regional primary did not produce the desired ends of more clout and more participation. As a result, some states moved their primaries to more cost-effective later dates, cancelled their primaries, or if they remained interested in clout, tried for earlier dates.

The various dates, and rotating dates across years, also may confuse voters. American voters are already taxed with on and off-year elections, state-level primaries scheduled either in the spring or the early fall, and a variety of dates for local elections. Adding an ever moving presidential primary date to the mix may stretch voters' patience. Confusion over dates may lead voters to miss registration or absentee ballot deadlines. Finally, the date of the regional primary may not fit voters' lifestyles. A June primary may be too late for some voters; especially in states where hot summer weather leads

residents to seek vacations in cooler climes. Alternatively, snowbirds may miss the March primaries in their cold and icy northern home states.

The regional primary format does not guarantee increased voter participation. Currently, presidential primary turnout averages 25 percent but varies from 5 to 55 percent (Norrander 1992). Voter turnout is affected by the number of candidates competing, the intensity of the campaigning, the closeness of presidential race at the national and state levels, other contests on the ballot, and the history of primaries in the state (Geer 1989; Moran and Fenster 1982; Norrander 1986; Norrander and Smith 1985;; Rotenberg and Brody 1988). Rotating regional primaries will interfere with political traditions for dates for primary election and will necessitate the separation of state-level from presidential primaries. The number of candidates, intensity of campaigning, and competitiveness of the campaign are hard to predict with a switch to the regional primary format overall and even more difficult to foresee for particular states. Thus, voter participation rates will continue to vary widely across the states, and without a consistency in dates or importance of a state's contest may not increase primary participation rates overall.

The regional primary format will not decrease the influence of the media. The press will continue to give the most attention to the first region, just as they now focus on Iowa and New Hampshire. Three decades of research on patterns of media coverage indicates the attractiveness of the first hard votes for presidential candidates as a news story (Robinson and McPherson 1977; Robinson and Sheehan 1983). The press, also, is unlikely to give equal coverage to the states within each region. Such was the case in the the 1988 southern regional primary where Florida and Texas received more coverage

than other states (Gurian 1993; Hadley and Stanley 1992; Norrander 1992). The regional primary format also will not diminish the importance of the pre-election year phase, where the press uses reasonable rules (such as candidate strength in polls and campaign funds raised) to allocate more media coverage to some candidates and less attention to second-tier candidates. Without a small state to concentrate their early efforts and gain public support, second-tier candidates may find it more difficult to move up into the ranks of the more frequently covered candidates.

Interest groups will not lose strength with the regional primary format. Their influence is not through campaign contributions. Little PAC money is contributed to candidates seeking the presidential nominations because the matching fund system did not match such contributions. However, a continual demise of the matching fund system may open up this avenue. Interest groups currently play a role through endorsements and most recently with issue advocacy advertisement. This latter tactic is likely to escalate given recent relaxation of rules for advocacy advertisements from the Supreme Court, and a regional primary format may actual increase the likelihood of such advertisements.

Prospects of Enacting Regional Primaries

Voters are mildly displeased with the exiting system of presidential primaries and caucuses. The most typical survey question in public opinion polls is whether or not the current system of presidential primaries is a good method for picking the best qualified candidate. Depending on election year, exact question wording and polling firm, support for the current system varies from 38 to 61 percent, with an average of just less than 50 percent approval (Norrander 2007). However, public dissatisfaction does not center on

calendar components of the process. In a March 1996 Pew poll when asked why they disapproved of the current system, respondents focused on the influence of money and the media and candidate campaign styles. Only in a resentment of Iowa and New Hampshire always coming first does the public disapprove of the calendar component to the current presidential nomination system. Even front-loading of the calendar is not a significant concern of the American public. Two polls from 2007 found 51 to 63 percent expressing the opinion that the consolidation of primaries on the early dates would have no affect on the nomination outcome. When asked for their opinions on regional primary reforms, between 40 and 57 percent approve, producing an average of 48 percent approval. One in five respondents expresses no opinion in response to survey questions about regional primaries. Public support is higher for a single one-day national primary, averaging at 58 percent though reaching as high as 75 percent in a May 2000 CBS News/New York Times poll. A population-based grouping of primaries is supported by 40 percent of the American public. Public demand for reform of the primary calendar is moderate, at best, and the preferred alternative is a single-day national primary rather than regional primaries.

Legislators and scholars argue about whether Congress has the authority to enact a regional primary law. The Constitution provides a limited role for the federal government in regulating presidential elections, confining Congressional authority to setting "the Time of chusing [sic] the Electors, and the Day on which they shall give their Votes…" (U.S. Constitution, Article II, Section 1). In contrast, the Constitution provides a wider regulatory role for congressional elections, having the authority to set the time, place and manner of the elections. At the 2007 Senate hearings, Loyola Law School

professor Richard Hasen (2007) argued that Congress's authority to set a uniform date for the presidential election would extend to the nomination phase as well. In addition, he argued that Supreme Court approval of federal regulations on campaign finance and lowering the voting age for federal elections, which affect presidential as well as congressional elections, means that the Court would approve of regulating presidential nominations. Northeastern University Political Science Professor William Mayer (2007) disagrees. His interpretation is that the Constitution does not allow Congress to impose rules for primary elections on the states, and that recent Supreme Court decisions upholding the First Amendment rights of association for the political parties does not allow Congress to impose rules on parties' choices of nomination formats.

Both national parties currently object to congressional action. Yet, party rules and past action make dramatic changes to the nomination format unlikely. Republican Party rules require changes to be enacted at the prior convention. Thus, the 2008 convention would have to approve a plan for it to be applied to the 2012 nomination. The Republican Party was not successful in enacting a dramatic set of reforms in 2000. After its Advisory Commission on the Presidential Nominating Process proposed a population-based grouping of primaries, its Rules committee voted down the proposal at its July 2000 session. Democratic changes in recent years have been more piecemeal. After trying to hold the onset of primaries and caucus to the beginning of March, in 2004 the party allowed February primaries to match the timing of the Republican Party and to facilitate a swifter selection of the nominee. For 2008, the Democrats again modified the existing system by adding Nevada and South Carolina to the initial contests. Yet, both parties have had difficulties holding the line against states moving outside of these

windows, and both have threatened to remove delegates from states not conforming to primary date rules. While both national parties have an interest in maintaining control over their presidential nominations, whether they have the will or ability to enact dramatic reforms is a more unlikely prospect. In the end, the winning party (or candidate) is not interested in changing a procedure that produced a successful nomination.

Either a congressional or party-sponsored regional primary plan would have to be implemented by state legislatures. At a minimum states will have to change the dates of their primary or caucus. State legislators are not necessarily interested in the presidential nomination process. They are more concerned about their own renominations and balancing state budgets. In addition, a national system setting dates for presidential primaries may open a Pandora's Box on other state-based components of the nomination process. States vary in the manners of placement of candidate's names on the ballots. In some states, state officials select the names to place on the ballot and in others, candidates submit voter signed petitions and/or filling fees. The procedures used to allocate delegates based on the outcome of the preference ballots also vary across the states and across the two parties. Would uniform dates require uniformity for other primary rules?

Political reforms are rare and when enacted do not always produce the desired results. The impetuses for past reforms include reform movements, electoral crises, or the interests of a particular candidate or party faction (Busch and Ceaser 1996). Reform movements such as the Progressives led to the initial use of presidential primaries while the New Politics movement of the 1960s fostered the Democratic rule change. No such

reform movement exists today. Electoral crises also precipitate reforms, as did the disastrous 1968 Democratic convention. Conventions today are extensively scripted, under the control of the presidential nominee and the national organization. Even if one party loses control of its convention, the other party is unlikely to do so at the same time. Regional primary reform would require bipartisan agreement on the format, and both parties are unlikely to be unhappy with the nomination process in the same year. After all, one of the two major party's nominee always wins the White House.

Conclusions

Political reforms are fraught with uncertainty. Reforms do not always produce the desired outcomes. Members of the McGovern-Fraser Commission did not expect that their new rules for fairer participation would produce a proliferation of presidential primaries. The McCain-Feingold ban on soft money to the political parties did not eliminate this type of campaign contribution but simply shifted these large sums of money to interest groups, instead. History suggests that the enactment of a regional primary system would be extremely difficult. If the enactment hurdle is overcome, both advocates and critics of regional primaries might be surprised by the characteristics of the new nomination system. These characteristics would be the result of the uncoordinated actions of presidential nominee seekers, state legislators, local and nation media (and new media such as the Internet), interest groups and the American voter.

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