

A Really Super Tuesday

By Martin Plissner

Americans had a tough time in November 2000 deciding among the candidates produced by primaries and caucuses strewn randomly across the calendar earlier that year. But they had no difficulty deciding what they thought about the system that produced them. When a CBS News/*New York Times* poll asked voters to choose between that system and one in which the whole country voted on the same day, they picked the national primary by 4 to 1. They've been telling that to pollsters for decades. Now there is a good chance they may finally get their way.

By the beginning of 2000, a primary calendar that once ran from January to June had shrunk to one in which nearly three-quarters of the elected delegates to both conventions were chosen during the first three Tuesdays in March, and both nominations were decided on the first Tuesday.

This concentration had grown over time as states leapfrogged one another from one cycle to the next, hoping to get their voters to the polls before it was too late to matter. Shrinking the process from six months to three weeks, however, only made things worse. In the last go-round, two-thirds of the country's Democrats and Republicans were denied an effective voice in choosing their parties' nominees because their states had missed the boat by a week or two. Few legislatures are apt to make the same mistake again.

Until the winter meeting of the Democratic National Committee, one last obstacle remained to a final consolidation of the nominating calendar in 2004. Republican rules allow primaries to start in February.

Democratic rules prohibited all but one (New Hampshire) until March. At their meeting, the Democrats eliminated that obstacle by moving their 2004 starting date up to the Republicans'. In the stampede from March into February that is sure to follow, no state legislature in its right mind will pick the second, third or fourth Tuesday.

Welcome to the National Presidential Primary of Tuesday, February 3, 2004.

This is not, to be sure, what the DNC stalwarts had in mind. Chairman Terry McAuliffe says he simply wanted to get the business done as early as possible so the eventual nominee wouldn't get roughed up too much in the process, while the other party's sitting president got its nomination delivered on a platter.

In the past, rules changes have been known to turn around and bite their backers, and this one could be no exception. Given more than a half-dozen Democrats with national stature and a gift for raising money eying that Ultra-Tuesday in '04, and a party rule that requires them to divvy up delegates in proportion to their vote, McAuliffe on February 4 could find all the delegates chosen and nobody with even half the number needed to win. Back to the golden age of brokered conventions, backroom deals and ballots droning on day and night. Reporters, not to mention Republicans, would love it.

Now, that is not the kind of national primary process that voters, if they thought about it, would likely favor. Yet, as they rightly sense, a national primary, if done properly, could make sense. You would hold it in June, not February, and it would not involve delegates—which are relics of the past.

Opponents of such a primary argue that it gives a big edge to an establishment-backed frontrunner with a load of money. But so does the current

system. Nor is it easy to conceive a system that would not do this. In nearly thirty years, no establishment-backed frontrunner in either party has failed to win the nomination, and no one has won who was significantly outspent.

Were a national primary held in which the frontrunner had to win a majority or face a runoff, it's far from certain the establishment choice would escape a runoff all or even most of the time. The runner-up, having defeated the rest of the field in a vote of the entire country, would go into that runoff with far better prospects (not to mention a burst of new money) than someone who had barnstormed Iowa and/or New Hampshire since day one and done better than expected.

With the entire country scheduled to vote the same day, broadcast networks as well as cable might find it in their hearts to carry debates among the finalists—by far the best means of getting voters to focus on the policies and attributes of candidates for office. After a July break, one- or two-day celebrations, which might as well go on being called conventions, could be held in August, which would still leave plenty of time for the country to choose between the winners.

Not all of this will happen in '04. These things take time. It took seventy years for a system of state primaries widely scattered in time to replace entirely the boss-run conventions of the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries. But, while that is not what the Democrats had in mind with their latest rules change, it is where they are inescapably pointing the way. In politics, good things often happen when they are least intended. ●

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