

RESOLVED, political parties should nominate candidates for president in a national primary

PRO: Caroline J. Tolbert

CON: David P. Redlawsk

From the beginning, the Constitution offered a clear answer to the question of who should elect the president: the electoral college. Or did it? Virginia delegate George Mason was not alone in thinking that after George Washington had passed from the scene, the electoral college would seldom produce a winner. In such a far-flung and diverse country, Mason reasoned, the electoral vote would almost invariably be fractured, leaving no candidate with the required 50 percent plus one of electoral votes. Mason estimated that “nineteen times in twenty” the president would be chosen by the House of Representatives, which the Constitution charged with making the selection from among the top five (the Twelfth Amendment, enacted in 1804, changed it to the top three) electoral vote getters in the event that no candidate had the requisite electoral vote majority. In essence, Mason thought, the electoral college would narrow the field of candidates and the House would select the president.

Mason was wrong: in the fifty-seven presidential elections since 1788, the electoral college has chosen the president fifty-five times. Not since 1824, in the contest between John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, and William Crawford, has the House chosen the president. And contrary to Mason’s prediction, the nomination of candidates has been performed not by the electoral college but by political parties.

The framers of the Constitution dreaded the prospect of parties. Based on their reading of ancient Greek and Roman and more recent European history, they equated political parties with conspiratorial factions. But a two-party system nonetheless began to emerge while Washington was still president, and from the start it has functioned much better in practice than the framers feared. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how the Constitution could work without parties to choose candidates, aggregate voters' preferences, and help bridge the divide between the legislative and executive branches of the national government as well as the gaps between the layers of the federal system.

Over the years, the parties have experimented with different methods for nominating presidential candidates. The resolution proposed in this debate raises the possibility of trying yet another method: a national primary. A national primary, if adopted, would be the fifth method of presidential nomination that the parties have used. The first was the congressional caucus, in which each party's members of Congress met in private to choose their candidate for president. The problem with "King Caucus," as critics called it, was that it denied a voice in the decision to every party member and activist who did not happen to be represented by a fellow partisan in Congress. To address this objection, the congressional caucus was gradually replaced during the 1830s by a second method of nomination: the national party convention, at which delegates chosen by all of the state parties conducted most of their business in public instead of behind closed doors.

Conventions are still around, but what has changed over the years is the way the delegates to the conventions are chosen. Originally, they were picked by the leaders of each state party. During the early twentieth century, most states continued to do things this way, but others began requiring that convention delegates be chosen through state primaries in which rank-and-file voters could participate. This third method of nominating presidential candidates—often called the "mixed system"—lasted through 1968, a year dominated by controversy over the war in Vietnam. Many voters were so frustrated that neither of the major-party nominees, Democrat Hubert Humphrey and Republican Richard Nixon, opposed the war that they demanded the parties create a fourth method of nomination in which every state party would be required to choose its delegates in either a primary or an open caucus.

The fourth nomination method—the one still in use—resembles each of its predecessors by involving more people and thus further democratizing the process. Like its predecessors, too, the state primary and caucus method has come under criticism. Some complain that the process takes too long and

costs too much. Others argue that it gives the small states that hold their caucuses and primaries first—specifically, Iowa and New Hampshire—too much influence over which candidates have a realistic chance to win. To some, such as Caroline J. Tolbert, the logical next step is to replace the fifty state primaries and caucuses with a single national primary in which voters across the entire country cast ballots on the same day and every vote counts equally. Others, such as David P. Redlawsk, find more advantages than disadvantages in the current nominating method and believe that a national primary would make things worse rather than better.

PRO: Caroline J. Tolbert

The way we nominate our presidential candidates today is clearly unfair. The citizens in states that hold their nominating contests early in the process get smothered with attention from candidates and media, while citizens in states that vote later in the process barely get noticed. Frequently the contest is over almost before it starts, leaving many citizens (sometimes the majority of Americans) with no role in selecting their party's nominee. Voter turnout naturally plummets in the states with late primaries. In 2008 the Republican nomination was decided soon after Super Tuesday, leaving Republicans voting in later states with no meaningful choice, and in 2012 Mitt Romney's only real rival, Rick Santorum, dropped out in early April, with voters in twenty states, including the three most populous (California, Texas, and New York), having yet to cast a ballot. The selection of presidential candidates, one of the most important decisions that American voters make, should not be determined by a few states with early nominating contests. It is time for a national primary in which the citizens of all fifty states go to the polls on the same day and have equal voice in selecting candidates for president of the United States.

A national primary would solve three problems that plague the current system: the chaotic and self-defeating race to be among the first states to hold a nominating contest, abysmally low voter turnout, and the privileged position of Iowa and New Hampshire. A national primary would boost citizen participation while also restoring order and fairness to the way we select our presidential nominees.

SOLVING THE CHAOTIC RACE TO THE FRONT

Everybody knows that the current system is broken. As Rob Richie, executive director of FairVote, expresses it: "The entire political universe, from the heights of the Washington establishment to the depths of the grassroots, agrees that our presidential nominating process needs to be reformed."¹ Every four years the parties try to fix the problems in ways that often only make things worse. Of particular concern to the parties is the phenomenon known as front-loading²—that is, the process by which states schedule their primaries and caucuses near the beginning of the delegate selection calendar in order to have a greater voice in the process.

As part of their ongoing efforts to address the front-loading problem, both the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and the Republican National Committee (RNC) revised the schedules and rules in 2008 and again in 2012.

In 2008 the Democrats allowed two states (Nevada and South Carolina) to join Iowa and New Hampshire in violating the official February 5 delegate selection start date. (Nevada and South Carolina were selected because of their racial diversity—Hispanic in the former case, African American in the latter case—in order to compensate for the demographically unrepresentative character of Iowa and New Hampshire.) Any state that moved its nominating contest before February 5 would lose all of its delegates at the party's national convention. The Republicans adopted less draconian rules—violators of the start date would lose only half of their delegates. Yet these changes did little to lessen front-loading; 70 percent of all delegates were chosen by the beginning of March. Two large states (Michigan and Florida) defied both national parties and held their nominating contests before February 5.

In 2012 Florida again defied the parties, moving the state's primary up to January 31. New Hampshire and South Carolina responded by pushing their primaries earlier. All three states had their delegates cut in half by the Republican Party, but going early mattered more to the states than getting their full allotment of delegates. The front-loading in 2012 was lessened somewhat because of some unusual events. Wrangling over redistricting forced Texas to push its primary back to the end of May, and a state budget crisis led California to move its primary back to June. But there is no reason to expect that the front-loading problem will lessen in future elections. We can expect instead that states will continue to push their nominating contests earlier and earlier, because voting earlier is in their interests.

The front-loading problem is exacerbated by what is known as the “invisible primary”—that is, the period before the first nominating event during which candidates engage in extensive fund-raising.³ As candidates increasingly opt out of public financing, early money matters even more than in the past. The concern with a highly front-loaded nomination schedule is that candidates with the most money, name recognition, and media attention early on will win their parties' nominations. As Todd Donovan and Shaun Bowler have pointed out, between 1980 and 2004 all but one of the candidates who raised the most money the year before the first primary won their parties' nominations.⁴ Front-loading means that strong candidates who lack financial resources may never have a chance to compete.

The sequential nomination process was originally designed so that a wide field of candidates could compete in early nominating events, followed by a winnowing process. Those candidates who exceeded expectations in early contests were able to raise campaign dollars to compete in later contests. Those who did worse than expected dropped out of the race.⁵ However, events over the past decade have undermined the logic of the sequential nomination

process. Early money continues to increase in importance, regardless of the ever-changing schedule of state nominating contests. Conventional wisdom holds that retail or face-to-face politics in Iowa and New Hampshire was supposed to level the playing field among candidates, but new research finds that only candidates with sufficient financial resources are competitive, even in early nominating events such as the Iowa caucuses, which require extensive and expensive grassroots campaigning.⁶

Critics of the national primary suggest that it offers an extreme form of front-loading, and a national primary will only make things worse. They argue that a national primary would restrict the presidential nomination to candidates who are already well-known or well financed and could increase the influence of money, which is needed to purchase television ads.

This may have been a valid criticism in the 1980s and 1990s, but the rise of the new media means that candidates no longer need huge financial resources or elite endorsements to compete effectively in a national primary. Campaigning online may level the playing field. Dark-horse candidates can reach voters by using social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and YouTube video. They can also use candidate Web sites, blogs, and e-mail. The diversity of online media makes candidate campaigns more cost-effective and able to reach wider audiences because of the relatively low cost and twenty-four-hour availability of the Internet.⁷

Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 campaigns, for example, organized his supporters online, a feat that in the past would have required an army of volunteers and paid organizers on the ground. The Internet enables campaigns to mobilize supporters at a fraction of the cost of such mobilization in the past. Obama's campaign also took advantage of free advertising on YouTube and social media such as Facebook, instead of relying exclusively on television ads. Online political videos can be more effective than television ads because viewers make a conscious choice to watch instead of having their television programs interrupted by unwanted ads. During the 2008 presidential campaign, YouTube users spent 14.5 million hours watching Obama's video ads; buying 14.5 million hours of broadcast television ad time would have cost \$47 million.⁸ As of 2012, Obama's Facebook page had 31 million fans, and his YouTube channel (BarackObama.com) included almost three thousand videos. Online fund-raising has also become increasingly important, as Howard Dean first showed in 2004. Obama's victory in 2008 was made possible by the huge amounts of money the campaign raised online: \$750 million accrued from three million contributors. New media are rapidly changing how the game of politics is played, potentially neutralizing the impact of television advertising and making a national primary more realistic.

One thing is certain: we cannot fix the current system by patching it. State legislatures, secretaries of state, and state party leaders have a vested interest in holding their states' nominating events early in the process to receive attention from the candidates and mass media and to boost their state economies. Michigan and Florida acted rationally by breaking party rules in 2008. Left to their own self-interest, states will continue to move their primaries and caucuses closer to the beginning of the delegate selection calendar, exacerbating the front-loading problem. What is individually rational for each state, however, is bad for American democracy. Instead of ineffective party rules that try to penalize states for pursuing their self-interest, we should adopt a national primary that takes away the incentive that states currently have to circumvent the rules and leapfrog other states. By requiring all states to hold their nominating contests on the same day, a national primary solves the problem of individually rational states producing a collective outcome that is preferred by nobody.

SOLVING THE TURNOUT PROBLEM

Observers often bemoan the low numbers of American citizens who turn out for elections, but turnout in the general election is positively robust compared to the turnout in primary elections, let alone caucuses. In 2000, for instance, turnout of the voter-age population was only 14 percent in the Democratic primaries and 17 percent in the Republicans primaries. In other words, less than one-third of age-eligible Americans participated in a presidential primary. In contrast, more than half of the voting-age population voted in the general election. In 2004, when President George W. Bush was unopposed for the Republican nomination, primary turnout plummeted even lower, down to 24 percent. Meanwhile, 55 percent of age-eligible voters voted in the general election contest between Bush and Democrat John Kerry. The 2008 presidential nomination saw the largest primary turnout in history (estimates put the number at 55 million people, more than double the number who voted in the 2004 primaries), but even this was far less than the roughly 130 million people who voted in the general election. Primary turnout in 2008, moreover, sunk precipitously on the Republican side after Super Tuesday, when John McCain effectively wrapped up the nomination.⁹ Turnout in Republican primaries and caucuses in 2012 was even lower than in 2008, dropping to 6 percent of the eligible voter population in the Iowa caucuses (down from 12 percent in 2008) and 31 percent in the New Hampshire primary (down from nearly 50 percent). In the April 24 Republican primaries, which were held by the last states to vote before Romney formally sealed the

nomination, eligible voter turnout was 2 percent in Connecticut, 4 percent in Delaware, 16 percent in Pennsylvania, and 3 percent in Rhode Island. Voters in these states had no voice in selecting the presidential nominee. This is no way to pick the next president of the United States.

A national primary would do more than any other reform to increase participation in the nominating process. Holding an election on the same day across the entire country would create intense media interest and focus voters' attention on the election. With many viable candidates contesting, candidates would have an incentive to mobilize potential voters in all fifty states. As Lonna Atkeson and Cherie Maestas argue: "A national primary would focus broad voter attention on the race as candidates compete nationally instead of locally. Because everyone's primary would be 'coming up,' all interested voters would tune in to candidate debates to assist them in making their choice."¹⁰

Recent experience with the current nominating process confirms what common sense tells us: creating a competitive election on a single day will increase turnout. Over the past decade, an increasing number of states have held their primaries on Super Tuesday, inching us ever closer to a de facto national primary. In 2008, twenty-three states held their primaries or caucuses on Super Tuesday, and these states experienced significantly higher turnout in primaries and caucuses than did other states.¹¹

SOLVING THE IOWA PROBLEM

The "Iowa problem" refers to the fact that since 1972 this small midwestern state has always gone first in the presidential nomination, followed by another small state, New Hampshire. What rational reason is there for Iowa and New Hampshire to receive this special status? The electorates of both states are highly unrepresentative of the nation. Iowa is 90 percent white and largely rural, with an economy that is mainly agricultural.¹² Having Iowa vote first is tradition—but sometimes traditions need to be changed.

Adding to the Iowa problem is the fact that turnout in the state's caucuses is extremely low. Caucuses are time-consuming party business meetings, reducing participation in the process. Only 6 percent of the voting-eligible population caucused in Iowa in 2004 and 2012, and 7 percent in 2000. Competitive contests on both the Democratic and the Republican sides in 2008 boosted turnout to 16 percent, but even this higher turnout rate is much lower than the turnout in primary 2008 elections. In New Hampshire, for instance, more than half of the eligible population voted, and in South Carolina 30 percent turned out to vote. Some research suggests that participation in the relatively high-turnout 2008 Iowa caucuses may not have been

as biased in terms of partisanship and socioeconomic factors as is usually the case, but even high-turnout caucuses are less representative than low-turnout primaries.¹³

Low turnout means that Iowa caucus goers are unrepresentative of Iowa's rank-and-file party members. Caucus participants are better educated, older, and have higher incomes than Iowa registered voters in general.¹⁴ They are also more committed to and active in their parties than the average citizen. Low turnout in the caucuses also makes it costly for candidates to campaign in Iowa; contacting caucus goers has been compared to finding a needle in a haystack.

Even if Iowa were not unrepresentative of the nation, and Iowa's caucus goers were not unrepresentative of Iowa's citizens, its disproportionate impact on the primary process would still be a problem. Analysis of the 2004 election found that early voters have up to twenty times the influence of late voters in the selection of presidential candidates, and that the preferences of Iowa voters were six times as influential as those of Super Tuesday voters.¹⁵ Why should voters in Iowa and New Hampshire, two-small population states, be given wildly disproportionate influence in choosing who our presidential nominees will be?

Defenders of the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary highlight the grassroots or face-to-face politics that are made possible by the small populations of these two states.¹⁶ As I have argued above, however, the Internet allows candidates to participate in grassroots politics without Iowa and New Hampshire always voting first. Even if we concede that a national primary would involve making some sacrifices, those sacrifices may be worth making to achieve a fairer process that gives all citizens, not just a few favored ones, an equal say in which candidates will represent their parties in the contest for the nation's highest and most powerful office.

THE PEOPLE SUPPORT A NATIONAL PRIMARY

The American people understand that the current system is unfair. Two separate surveys conducted in 2008 found that the people's preferred reform is the national primary. In both surveys, about seven in ten Americans said they favored a national primary.¹⁷ These numbers are consistent with the findings of earlier surveys.¹⁸ Even when proposals for a national primary are framed in terms of the costs (for example, when respondents are prompted that if a national primary is adopted, small-population states may lose influence), a clear majority of Americans still support a national primary.

Support for a national primary varies somewhat by state size. In a 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Panel (CCAP) survey, respondents from states

with small populations were somewhat more likely (73 percent) to support a national primary than were those from the largest-population states (63 percent). This finding is perhaps surprising, since critics of a national primary often argue that a national primary would disadvantage small states, which would rarely get campaign visits. It suggests, however, that those who reside in small states (apart from those living in Iowa and New Hampshire) are the ones who harbor the greatest frustrations with the current process.

The 2008 CCAP survey also asked respondents about an alternative reform that would rotate the order so that “a different state goes first each time.” This idea attracted much lower levels of support. Only a bare majority (51 percent) reported that they favored it. Rotation, Americans understand, is fairer than what we have now, but not nearly as fair as having everybody vote at the same time.¹⁹

HOW A NATIONAL PRIMARY WOULD WORK

One way of implementing a national primary is to declare the candidate with the most votes the winner of his or her party’s nomination. However, there are four other methods of implementing a national primary that I believe are preferable to this plurality system.

First, a national primary could be followed several weeks later by a runoff election, in which the two candidates with the most votes would compete head-to-head for their party’s nomination. This would be similar to the French presidential election system. The advantage of a runoff election is that each party would be assured that the candidate with the support of a majority within the party would win the nomination. A runoff election would prevent a candidate from winning with only a plurality of the votes of rank-and-file party members. The disadvantages of this method are the cost of the additional election and the potential for lower turnout in the runoff election.

Second, the parties could use ballots to conduct instant runoff voting (IRV), which allows voters to rank-order their candidate preferences. IRV simulates a runoff election without the need for a costly second election. Here is how it works: Voters rank candidates in order of preference (first, second, third, fourth, and so on). They can rank as many or as few candidates as they want. The voters’ first choices are then tabulated, and if a candidate receives a majority (not a plurality) of first-choice votes, he or she is elected. If no candidate has a majority of votes on the first count, a series of runoffs are simulated, using the voters’ preferences as indicated on the ballots. The candidate who receives the fewest first-place choices is eliminated first. All ballots are then recounted. The ballots of voters who chose the now-eliminated candidate are

counted for their second-ranked candidates, but all other voters continue supporting their top candidate. Candidates continue to be eliminated and voters' ballots redistributed until a candidate gains a majority of votes. A majority is defined as 50 percent of the votes plus 1.

IRV has recently been adopted in a number of American cities, including San Francisco, Minnesota, San Jose, and Aspen.²⁰ It is cost-effective, requires only one election, and allows voters to choose their favorite candidate without having to fear that their votes (say, for a Ralph Nader) will elect their least-favorite candidate (what is called the "spoiler effect"). Most important, like an actual runoff election, it ensures that the winner enjoys true support from a majority of party voters.

Third, one could design a national primary that requires the winning candidate to gain a majority of the delegates but without IRV and without a runoff election. A virtue of this approach is that it could make party conventions meaningful again. In a crowded field of candidates, no candidate would be likely to gain a majority of delegates, and therefore the nomination would have to be settled at the convention. Making party conventions meaningful again could help to strengthen political parties and party leaders.

Finally, one could design a compromise system that retains state-by-state primaries and caucuses (perhaps in small-population states only) but culminates in a National Primary Day. As the candidates compete they would accumulate delegates as usual, and the field of candidates would narrow as those doing poorly gradually drop out. In the first week of June or thereabouts, the remaining candidates would go head-to-head in a national primary open to party voters across the entire country. Combining a national primary with sequential state elections retains the best of both worlds. A National Primary Day would ensure that all voters across the country would have a chance to play a decisive role in the selection of their party's nominee, while the sequential state contests would allow sufficient time for examination of the candidates' characters and skills. The parties could limit the number of candidates in the final primary to the top two, or they could allow more candidates to participate using IRV.

CONCLUSION

The American people are ready for a fundamental change in the way they choose their presidential nominees. Their clear preference is for a national primary, which would treat all citizens for all states alike and make all votes count equally. In 2012, the presidential nomination race was over before citizens of twenty states—containing about half of the American population—could cast

a vote. Those left out included the roughly 38 million people in California, 26 million in Texas, 20 million in New York State, 13 million in Pennsylvania, and 10 million in North Carolina. By way of contrast, Iowa and New Hampshire combined have fewer than 4.5 million people. It is not fair to exclude so many citizens in so many states from having a voice in picking the candidates for president of the United States. A national primary will give every state a meaningful, competitive contest, increase voter turnout, and eliminate the ever-changing, crazy-quilt system of primaries and caucuses. A national primary, in short, will give the nation, at long last, a nomination process that promotes popular participation and is both simple and fair.

CON: David P. Redlawsk

It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried.

—Sir Winston Churchill, House of Commons, November 11, 1947

Let's start with a proposition. Like democracy itself, the sequential arrangement of state caucuses and primaries that makes up our presidential nominating system is about the worst system imaginable—but only until we consider the alternatives. Given our federal system, no other approach has been found to be any better, at least not by those who would have to adopt it. And a national primary? While nearly three-quarters of the American public say they want one, a national primary is the last thing on the agenda of those who actually have to live with the system: candidates and parties.¹ *The Hill* newspaper, covering inside-the-Beltway Washington, reported in 2009 that “a national primary is something everyone hopes to avoid.”² According to the article, Bob Bennett, former Ohio Republican Party chair, said, “If you go back and you talk to any of the presidential candidates [from 2008], they will tell you they do not want to go through what they went through last year.”

Why this disconnect between the public's desire for something called a “national primary” and party leaders' preference for anything but? The reason is simple. As much as candidates, pundits, and the public like to complain about the current system, at the least it allows candidates to build their campaigns over time, to develop and hone their strategies, and possibly to build momentum as they move through the events that define the modern presidential nomination system. Our system begins slowly—with the small states of Iowa and New Hampshire—and then builds through a few more states before

exploding onto the scene with Super Tuesday, when a large number of states hold their contests on the same day. By starting in a few places rather than nationally, even less well-known or less well-funded candidates can nurture the hope that they might break through and capture the momentum that could carry them to the nomination.

We only need to consider the scorn heaped on Super Tuesday by academics and candidates to wonder how a national primary could be better than what we have now. Super Tuesday is a consequence of “front-loading.” Front-loading means that rather than pacing the caucuses and primaries out over some period of time (say, thirteen weeks or so), states rush to go as early as possible, in order to be “relevant” and to reap whatever benefits attention might give them. The lesson of Iowa and New Hampshire is not lost; in 2004 by one measure Iowa received 243 times the media coverage of any other state, while an analysis of candidate momentum in 2004 found the preferences of Iowa voters were six times as influential as those of Super Tuesday voters.³ Twenty-three states voted on Super Tuesday in 2008, making it virtually a de facto national primary. While fewer states joined the March 6, 2012, Super Tuesday, those that did represented more than one-third of the delegates needed to win the Republican nomination.

Why is front-loading a problem? As William Mayer notes, front-loading “increases the amount of early fundraising required and thereby limits the number of candidates who are able to mount a credible, competitive campaign.”⁴ Moreover, Mayer argues, front-loading gives voters little time to learn about the candidates and forces candidates to be less substantive as they rely heavily on paid media rather than personal contact. One can only imagine the results if all fifty states (and the District of Columbia and territories) held their nominating events on the same day. Candidates would be unable to focus in any one place, media would be stretched thin trying to cover all of the states, and voters would likely end up seeing superficial media campaigns focused on six-second television news sound bites or perhaps thirty-second YouTube videos.

Neither candidates nor the parties want to see a national primary of any type. If anything, their desire is to design a system that retains the sequential nature of the process but spreads the primaries out over a longer period of time. In fact, Super Tuesday was smaller and less consequential in 2012, and primaries were more evenly distributed across the primary calendar. Since it is the states and the political parties that determine the calendar, this is additional evidence that the parties would prefer to avoid anything resembling a national primary.

The public, on the other hand, seems solidly in favor of a national primary. This might be compelling, except that the public is also in favor of rotating state primaries—about 63 percent, according to a February 2008 University of

Iowa Hawkeye Poll. While the public as a whole may indicate a preference for something other than the current system, it is not clear that there is a clamor for a national primary as such. Instead, it is more likely that poll respondents are simply parroting a media-driven narrative that something is wrong with the current system. In fact, in the same survey, voters were just as likely (about 72 percent) to support a rotating system that would guarantee Iowa and New Hampshire's preeminence as they were to support a national primary.

From the voters' perspective, the question of a national primary would seem to be relatively unimportant. Most never vote in primaries anyway. And for those who do, the campaign does not start months or even years before, as it does for those in Iowa and New Hampshire, but instead builds up only a few weeks ahead of the vote. Voters in each state do not have time to become fatigued by the election. But who does become fatigued? The pundits who begin following the candidates long before the Iowa caucuses find themselves listening to the same stump speeches over and over, attending too many county fairs, taking too many bus rides across the country, and otherwise becoming exhausted by the process. Their exhaustion then plays out in their commentary. For example, in 2008 the timing was such that six weeks passed between the March 11 Mississippi primary and the next one in Pennsylvania in late April. This allowed intense focus on Pennsylvania by both candidates and media. The media, however, treated the campaign as if it had already happened and Pennsylvanians should already have been aware of all the issues and candidates. This became clear in the debate between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, during which the debate moderators, Charles Gibson and George Stephanopoulos, seemed focused on trivia, failing to ask good questions on important issues. No doubt part of the reason is that while the campaign was new to Pennsylvania voters, who were likely paying close attention for the first time, it was very old to the press and the pundits, who assumed everyone else had also heard it all before.

Although the exhaustion of a cynical media would not be a problem with a national primary, whether the media are tired of the process is not the point. A national primary might make things easier for the media—including saving them money by shortening the campaign coverage period—but it would cause more harm than good to the broader political system.

Let's consider what a desirable system would look like. We should evaluate reform on its ability to promote four goals: candidate quality, voter information, voter participation, and state equality. A presidential nomination system should choose *quality candidates*, not simply those who are the most well-known or the best financed. The system should allow voters to *learn* by providing them with appropriate information. Moreover, the nomination system

should encourage voter *participation*, so that voters become interested and involved. Finally, it should strive for *equality* among the states in terms of allowing all Americans to cast meaningful votes.

A true national primary—a system in which all states' primaries are held on one day—is likely to fail these tests. We can already see this in what happens during the general election. Candidates focus on a few “swing” states, pouring resources into them while ignoring most states as uncompetitive. Candidates spend much of their money on thirty-second television ads that seem designed to confuse rather than to explain. And few voters ever actually see a candidate in person, unless it is for fifteen minutes on an airport tarmac as the candidate flies in, gives a canned stump speech, and flies out to the next stop. This country is simply too large to allow candidates to campaign effectively across all states if the states' primary elections are all held on the same day.

Defining what makes a “quality” presidential candidate is difficult. Political scientists say a quality congressional candidate is one who has held previous elected office and who can raise enough money to contest the election.⁵ But most presidential candidates have held public office, and at least at the beginning it is difficult to tell who will be most effective at raising campaign funds.

It is clear, however, that a national primary would advantage certain types of candidates at the expense of others. Those with ready access to very large sums of money very early—certainly at least in the year before the primary—would be able to buy the advertising time needed to contest the whole country at the same time, while others who might also be good candidates but cannot initially raise large sums would be locked out. The simple math of a national primary is that money would speak even more loudly than it does today. And it would speak through massive media campaigns rather than personalized grassroots campaigns. Instead of building their campaigns over time, most potential candidates would have to opt out. It is already quite difficult for underdogs to come out on top, but at least they have a fighting chance. In 2008, had a national primary been in place, it is likely that the largest money raisers of 2007 would have been the leading candidates—Mitt Romney and Hillary Clinton. Barack Obama and John McCain might have remained afterthoughts. And while in 2012 Romney secured the Republican nomination after a bruising primary fight in which he was again the early money leader, a national primary would have squelched the voices of the many conservative Republicans who harbored doubts about Romney. The sequential process allowed a host of challengers to contest Romney's position, forcing him to address issues that many Republicans felt were important.

Moreover, and much more important, the sequential nature of the current system tests candidate campaigns in complex ways that would not happen otherwise. Caucuses, for example, require extensive organization. It is harder for candidates to reach caucus participants because there are fewer of them. Lower turnout in caucuses means that grassroots mobilization (“retail politics”) is critical, in contrast to the mass-media campaigns that would prevail in a national primary. And grassroots campaigning tests a candidate’s ability to build an organization, to create something that directly connects with voters. This ability to build, manage, and connect is an important skill for any would-be president, and one that would not be well tested in a national primary.

Candidates learn from a sequential process; they take lessons learned in one state and apply them to the campaign in the next. Few, if any, candidates really know how to run a national campaign before they start. Few, if any, have had experience that would qualify them to head a massive bureaucracy and to lead the nation. Building what amounts to a half-billion-dollar business from the ground up is not easy, and our current system allows candidates to learn how to do this over time. This means the quality of candidates can be improved by the nature of the sequential campaign season.

Just as candidates can learn from campaigning from one state to the next, so too do voters learn over time. One major advantage and unique feature of sequential voting is that voters later in the process have more information about candidates, including information on election outcomes, delegate totals, candidate traits, ideology, and policy positions.⁶ This may give later voters the opportunity to make more informed decisions than they would otherwise, while earlier voters may actually be slightly disadvantaged. But early states make up for this by the greater amounts of attention they get from the candidates and the media, enhancing their voters’ political interest and knowledge. Examination of the 2008 campaign finds exactly that. Early nominating events shaped perceptions of whether candidates could win the nomination and presidency (viability and electability) and in turn shaped candidate choice in later primaries and caucuses. Early voters were mobilized and later voters became more aware and involved as long as the campaign remained competitive.⁷

As voters learn from a sequential system they are also encouraged to participate, especially with candidates on the ground holding events that are open and accessible. Granted, this is much more likely in smaller early states than in larger later states, but the counterexample of Pennsylvania in 2008 is instructive. Because there was a period before the Pennsylvania primary during which no other primaries were scheduled, candidates had time to hold events, build the grass roots, and encourage participation. And Pennsylvania voters responded. While the same cannot be said of most of the states on Super

Tuesday, this is a problem of front-loading rather than of a sequential system. A properly spaced sequential process enhances voter participation in ways a national primary cannot. Voters are encouraged to participate when candidates can build an organization and are discouraged when candidates rely primarily on media campaigns. Political operative Dan Leistikow, who worked for both John Edwards and Obama, made this point in talking about Iowa:

In Iowa, regular people can look candidates in the eyes, size them up, and ask tough questions. Changing the schedule to favor larger states where TV commercials matter more than face to face contact with voters might be good for the frontrunner, but it isn't good for our democracy.⁸

Finally, the fact that some states seem less important and others more important in a sequential system is hard to overlook. Obviously, some state must go first. And because we generally know the dates of our elections in advance, both candidates and the media will flock to the earliest states as early as they can. This is unavoidable in a sequential system and certainly one area where a national primary might fix a perceived problem. But why should we expect that candidates will treat all states equally in a national primary? Treatment of states in a national primary will depend heavily on how the votes are aggregated. If the system proposes simply counting votes nationally and awarding each party's nomination to the candidate with the most votes, then candidates will focus on the largest vote-rich states, to the detriment of the majority of states. Perversely, moreover, Democrats will focus on the most Democratic states and Republicans will focus on the most Republican states. Thus not only will some states be ignored, but the process is also likely to reinforce the current dichotomy between red states and blue states. Perhaps, instead, the national primary should award delegates state by state, as is now the case. But this would do nothing to solve the problem for Republicans, since the largest states get the most delegates, and in many of these states delegates have been awarded on a winner-take-all basis. If anything, this could cause Republican candidates to focus even more intently on the largest, most Republican states. Democrats, because they do not use winner-take-all for delegate selection, would focus on a mix of the largest Democratic states and ones in which a given candidate might think he or she has a particular advantage. So while Iowa and New Hampshire would clearly lose their privileged place in a national primary, it does not follow that voters in all states would become equal in their influence on the nomination.

These points lead to an interesting problem with the national primary idea: Who gets to decide how the individual states run their contests? Most national

primary proposals envision a single set of rules—using a primary election—that would apply to all states. While in theory this sounds reasonable, in practice our federal system leaves wide latitude to states to run their own elections. It is not even clear who could impose a national primary in the first place. Even the parties themselves do not have complete control over the timing or nature of their contests, since many states pay for the elections and legislate their dates and forms. In addition, those states that prefer caucuses would be overridden by a national primary.

A proposal that mandates that all contests be held on the same day but leaves the mechanism to the states is problematic as well. Problems arise even with as simple an issue as aggregating the votes nationally. Democratic state caucuses, for example, generally report delegate counts, not actual votes. And even where actual vote counts are reported, the lesson of the 2012 Iowa Republican caucus—in which former U.S. senator Rick Santorum and Mitt Romney essentially tied—is that variations in vote counting across states may cause serious problems. Any system that imagines tallying up the vote across all states will run into problems unless the form of voting is mandated and regularized across all states. A lack of consistency would doom any attempt at a national primary.

And then there is the problem of determining who wins. Both parties currently require that a candidate win an outright majority of delegates to the national convention to win the nomination. Would this translate into requiring a majority of votes? Would that then mean a runoff if no one gets a majority, as is likely? Alternatively, one could imagine a voting mechanism that would allow voters to specify first and second choices (generally known as instant runoff voting), but this then moves us back into the challenge of setting the same rules nationwide. Probably the biggest single problem with a national primary is that no one quite knows what form it would take and what its unintended consequences might be.

In defending the current system, I should make one thing clear: it has its problems. The incentive structure for the states usually causes them to rush to the earliest possible date, hoping to get the attention of both candidates and media. The campaigns seem to start earlier every four years. The parties could solve this problem, however, by establishing rules and sticking to them. Some attempt was made to do so in 2012, when only the Republican nomination was contested. States that violated the rules had their delegations cut in half, but this did not seem to make much difference. And in 2008, states that violated the rules were threatened with the same punishment, but in the end the national parties caved in once the nomination had been secured. Thus the lesson is that the rules can be violated with relative impunity.

Beyond this front-loading problem, the other problem that gets the most complaints is that nominees are usually decided well before the end of the primary season, resulting in some (maybe many) states becoming irrelevant. Obviously, this was not a problem for the Democrats in 2008, when the contest came down to the very last primary. In 2012, Romney did not lose his last major challenger until late April, after more than thirty contests had been held. Even in 2008, when McCain wrapped up the nomination by the end of February, more than 60 percent of states had voted, owing to massive front-loading that year. Recent contests suggest that worries that a candidate will win long before most states have their chance to vote are misplaced.

The early twentieth-century development of the primary election system was part of a series of reforms championed by the progressives of the era, designed for the most part to take power from political bosses and machines and place it in the hands of the rank and file. Primaries were seen as a way to break the control of the bosses in the smoke-filled rooms, allowing voters a direct say in who would be their parties' nominees. As primaries developed at the state level, interest began growing for a national presidential primary. Theodore Roosevelt offered to use a national primary in the 1912 Republican nomination, but incumbent president William Howard Taft declined.⁹ Numerous national primary bills have been introduced in Congress since that time, but none has come even close to passing. Putting aside the question of whether Congress actually has the constitutional power to mandate a national primary, it is interesting that, despite a long list of complaints about the current system, a national primary has not come to pass.¹⁰ And, in fact, it never should. While the current system may not be perfect—few if any human institutions are—the law of unintended consequences should be carefully noted. A national primary of any type—forcing all states to hold nominating events on the same day—simply does not offer significant improvement over the sequential nomination process we have today, which has served us reasonably well despite the complaints that have been lodged against it.

NOTES

PRO

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16. Christopher Hull, *Grassroots Rules: How the Iowa Caucus Helps Elect American Presidents* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).
17. Caroline J. Tolbert, David P. Redlawsk, and Daniel C. Bowen, "Reforming Presidential Nominations: Rotating State Primaries or a National Primary?," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 42 (2009): 71–79.

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CON

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