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## Time to replace Iowa and New Hampshire

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

After a botched Iowa Democratic caucus that led to questions about who, if anyone, actually won the vote, and a Republican vote in both Iowa and New Hampshire that seems to have only muddied the waters further, the full primary race is now on. But before moving on, it would behoove the leaders of the two big parties to take a moment and consider that it may be a good time to seriously rethink their primary process, with one clear goal in mind: replace Iowa and New Hampshire as the top automatic lead-off states.

The leadership of the two parties should have one overriding goal for their presidential selection: Choose a candidate who will give their side the best chance to win in November. While it may be pleasing to think that the party leaders should be trying to push for the best or most qualified candidate, the reality is that is not the party leaderships' real role anymore. Their real focus should be on helping the party take the White House and help other candidates down the ballot line.

Having clear results and a winnowing of the field each and every four years from Iowa and New Hampshire would likely go a long way to improving each parties' odds of winning. Based on the way the two parties bow to the wishes of these two states, one would think that they have been enormously successful in pushing candidates forward and in establishing clearly defined winners. If so, you would be wrong.

The track record of the two lead-off states is very poor. Iowa caucus is a bizarre process that few actually understand. The result is that the state's caucus might have called the wrong winner on two previous occasions, if not also last Monday.

The Republicans should have a bad feeling about the state. Three of their last four presidential winners, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and John McCain, lost in Iowa before winning the nomination.

New Hampshire's primary has a separate problem: a history of choosing bad candidates, such as Pat Buchanan, who had a strong showing in 1992 that knocked George H.W. Bush off his stride, and followed that by winning the state outright in 1996. For Democrats, the record is even worse — only one Democrat has ever won a contested New Hampshire primary and gone on to victory in November — Jimmy Carter. This fact may comfort Hillary Clinton supporters, who can look back to Obama and Bill Clinton and see that the Granite State is just a bump in the road, but party leaders should see a problem in need of fixing.

Party leaders have repeatedly looked at reforming the process, but always blanch at the threats brought down by Iowa and New Hampshire. What the party leaders have done instead is punish states that try to leapfrog to the head of the primary and caucus calendar. In 2008, Florida

and Michigan both lost their Democratic state delegations when they moved their votes before March 6. That one decision may have had a decisive effect on the Obama-Clinton primary fight. In 2012, only Florida tried this approach, and lost half their delegates.

There are some easy possible reforms, including rotating the lead-off states and creating regional primaries. All have been discussed, but neither party is really able to stand-up to Iowa and New Hampshire.

What is particularly odd about the hammerlock on the process is the fact that New Hampshire and Iowa don't even have a real historic claim — Florida was actually the first state to adopt the presidential primary idea, back in 1904. New Hampshire did not hold one until 1916, and did not even have a contested one till 1952. And Iowa did not hold a seriously contested caucus until 1972.

Most of the criticisms of the two lead-off states focus on the fact that they “don't look like America.” They are older, whiter, more rural and more homogeneous than the states that in the end decided who will be president. But that's not really their big problem. The real issue is that they so often fail at providing a good launch pad for a winning candidate.

Instead of cowering in the face of threats from those two states, the national parties should look for a reset on the process and take on the top two states.

The best answer may be a top-down requirement to rotate the lead-off states, giving others a chance to shine every four years. While not a cure, it would at least start the process of revamping a system that puts too much focus on two specific states.

*Commentary by Joshua Spivak, a senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College in New York. He blogs at the Recall Elections Blog, <http://recallelections.blogspot.com/> Follow him on Twitter @recallelections.*