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The primary problem

Why Florida's date-shift makes serious political sense

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

In what has become a quadrennial tradition, Florida decided to move up its presidential primary, ignoring threats from the Republican leadership. Florida's decision has caused a cascade effect, pushing the Iowa caucus to Jan. 3. This has occasioned some outcry from the party and sparked claims that Florida's decision damages the primary system. But Florida is right to dismiss such criticisms. The primary and caucus system has been a wreck from the beginning, and the national parties are largely to blame.

The current controversy is simple: Florida decided to flout the national parties' rule banning all but four states from holding primaries or caucuses before March 6. In order to enforce their rule — which benefits early-primary states New Hampshire, Iowa, Nevada and South Carolina — the Republicans will not recognize 50 percent of the delegates selected in any state that violates the pre-March 6 ban.

This may seem like a severe penalty, but in practice it will be useless. It's not even as harsh as the one the Democrats put in place against Florida and Michigan when they moved their primaries up in 2008: stripping away all of those states' delegates, including superdelegates.

The results of 2008 should be a warning for the Republican leadership now. First, the loss of the Florida and Michigan delegates led to an intense battle between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton over whether those two states' delegates, who would have supported Clinton, should be allowed back in. But focusing on the Democrats ignores important lessons from 2008. Florida and Michigan also played a major role in the Republican primaries. Michigan's primary extended Mitt Romney's run, which helped divide the anti-John McCain vote and push McCain into front-runner status. Florida's role was even more critical. Rudy Giuliani bet his campaign on succeeding there; his failure in the Sunshine State caused a mass migration of his supporters to the McCain camp. If Giuliani had stayed in the race, he would have kept some of these voters, perhaps helping to throw a number of important states — and a lot more delegates — into Romney's corner.

Even more important is the fact that the long Democratic primary battle of 2008 is a historical outlier. In 2004, John Kerry was effectively selected after only a few states voted. Most other candidates didn't even stick around for later primaries. Doing so would have been hard, anyway — once a front-runner starts winning delegates, campaign finance money flows solely to him, and other candidates find themselves short of funds and drop out. Voters in other states are effectively disenfranchised.

What makes this reality worse is that the system is not an age-old or time-tested tradition. The popular selection of party nominees only goes back a generation, and New Hampshire and Iowa do not have a long-standing historic claim to the top spots. The primary and caucus system only became a widespread method of choosing presidents after the 1968 election. The earlier use of the primary system was spotty and, except when Taft beat Roosevelt for the Republican nomination in 1912, mainly served as a test of strength, not a way of handing out delegates. New

Hampshire did not hold one until 1916, and did not even have a contested one till 1952. Florida was actually the first state to adopt the presidential primary idea, back in 1904. And Iowa — which takes pride in the rustic tradition of a caucus — did not hold a seriously contested one until 1972.

Furthermore, Iowa and New Hampshire don't have a great track record. Few people understand the way the Iowa caucus really works — according to Slate, the caucus may have announced the wrong winner in 1988. New Hampshire's primary has a separate problem: a history of choosing bad candidates, such as Pat Buchanan, who won in 1996. For Democrats, it's worse — not a single Democrat has ever won a contested New Hampshire primary and gone on to victory in November.

The two political parties do occasionally discuss revisions. For example, the Democratic National Committee met in 2006 to reform the primary process. But New Hampshire and Iowa crushed any real changes. A reform effort would break their hammerlock on the nomination process. Contenders, fearing that they would doom their hopes by upsetting the lead-off states, always retreat from any real reform, such as a rotating system of regional primaries.

For many voters in other states, the current nomination system means their votes might come in well after a winner has been chosen. But not Florida. By making a calculated gamble, Florida's Republican voters will at last have a meaningful say in the primary process.

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