Making Pennsylvania Relevant
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The 2004 presidential primary and caucus campaign season is now well underway across the country. It's a pretty important time. In fact, some have argued that primaries and caucuses are more important than the fall campaign because they narrow the choices down from the many to only two. And one of those two will be the next president.

If you live in Pennsylvania, however, you are going to be reduced to the status of official observer. That's because Pennsylvania's presidential primary won't matter a bit in determining who gets nominated. It won't matter because the front-runners will have a lock on the nominations before Pennsylvanians go to the polls in late April. Both the Republican and Democratic presidential nominees will be known. It will be all over—even the shouting.

Unfortunately, nothing is new here—not since 1976 has Pennsylvania voted in time to substantially influence the nomination in either party—and in the last several elections it has only become worse, as state after state "front loaded" their primary date. The Keystone state has become utterly irrelevant to the nomination of presidential candidates.

Some would like to change this. Recently a bill has been introduced into the state legislature to move the spring primary from the third Tuesday in April to the third week in March. Many believe the month difference could make Pennsylvania a player in the selection of a presidential nominee.

And the case for Pennsylvania becoming a player is a strong one.

Despite its large population and political prominence, Pennsylvania is virtually ignored in the crucial nominating process. This lack of influence severely compromises the power and influence of the state in national politics.

Equally compelling is the critical importance of Pennsylvania in the fall election itself. Pennsylvania is a pivotal swing state that could go either Republican or Democratic in the Electoral College, and it's one of maybe five states that could well determine the next president.

President Bush understands this all too well. He has visited the state 22 times in less than three years, an unprecedented number for any sitting president. Yet bizarrely, Pennsylvania plays no role—not even a supporting role—in the nomination process. Pennsylvania's voters may determine who wins the presidency, but have nothing to say at all about who runs for the presidency.

Alas, these arguments, strong as they are, have not been strong enough in the past to persuade a majority of legislators to enact an earlier primary. Nor do the chances for the current bill seem auspicious. Time and time again, a similar bill has been introduced. None has ever passed.

A variety of reasons are offered by legislators loath to change the primary date—most of them related to cost and logistics. In reality, the big reason for the resistance is political in nature: legislators are comfortable with
the current schedule and don't want to add uncertainty to their own nominations that take place at the same
time presidential primaries are held.

But if changing the primary is politically impossible, there is another option that could still make Pennsylvania
one of the nomination kingpins, instead of an after thought. And at the same time keep the current primary date
for non-presidential elections.

Here's how it could work. Currently, no state can challenge the historic right of Iowa to hold the first caucus or
of New Hampshire to hold the first primary. So even in the unlikely event that Pennsylvania had the political
will to jump in front, party precedents forbid it.

However, there is a loophole here big enough for both political parties--and absolutely nothing to stop
Pennsylvania from using it. More important than Iowa and New Hampshire is the set of delegate selections
that occur in early February.

For example, in 2004 Democrats in seven states hold delegation selection events on February 3rd. Five of
them will hold primaries and two will select delegates in caucus meeting. (There is of course no nomination
contest in the Republican Party.)

Here's where it gets interesting. Instead of Pennsylvania waiting until late April, it could dump the presidential
primary altogether, and hold instead a delegate selection process on February 3rd. This new process for the
selection of delegates would allow the state's political parties to hold a series of county conventions.

At these conventions, a presidential preference straw poll would be held at the same time that participants
would pick delegates. Party officials, not election officials, would handle both the delegate selection process
and the straw poll.

Now imagine how important Pennsylvania would become with a cache of 178 delegates, making the state the
big enchilada before California with 441 does its selection on March 2. The presidential candidates would
stampede into Pennsylvania for visibility in their effort to win the straw poll and to win delegates selected in
the county meetings.

The lists of benefits for Pennsylvania are numerous. Here are a few.

- Local parties would be reinvigorated and an unparalleled level of grass roots activity would take
  place.
- Voters might actually pay attention to the process.
- The new convention system would attract millions of dollars leading to a sizable impact on the
  economy of the state.
- Early delegate selection would be a full employment bill for TV and radio stations, reporters,
pollsters, campaign operatives, pundits, and special interests.
- And most important of all, the state will become a vital part of the presidential nomination process.

Perhaps, in a perfect world adopting an early primary would be the best solution as other states have done. But
this isn't a perfect world. The political forces arrayed against an earlier primary are unmoving. It is not going
to happen.
A county convention system, however, offers a happy compromise—and it could happen. The costs would be low. And the rewards would be high. Pennsylvania’s electorate has been disenfranchised in presidential nominations for almost thirty years. For a long time, this has been unacceptable—now it’s also unnecessary.

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