Pennsylvania has a serious problem that needs urgent attention—call it Pennsylvania’s “primary problem.” Although it’s the 6th largest state, an Electoral College powerhouse, and a state bitterly fought over in presidential elections, Pennsylvania has little or no influence on the nominees for president. When it comes to nominating presidents, Pennsylvania is always a day late and a dollar short.

This unpleasant, indeed, bizarre circumstance has been maintained by the state legislature which has decreed that Pennsylvania should vote so late in the primary process that the presidential nomination is already wrapped up for both parties. Consequently, the Keystone State has become utterly irrelevant in the nomination of presidential candidates.

This is not a recent development. Pennsylvania’s role in the selection of presidential candidates has been in long and steady decline. Not since 1984 has Pennsylvania voted in time to influence nominee selection in any meaningful way. In the last several elections, it has only worsened, as state after state has “front loaded” their primary date.

Pennsylvania’s insignificance in presidential primaries has not gone completely unnoticed. Prior to the 2000 election, the state legislature’s Joint State Government Committee established a bipartisan taskforce to study the election calendar. Proposals for change were made, but reaction to them was mostly negative—largely coming from county election administrators stressing the logistical challenges associated with the proposed changes.

Nor were state politicians in general enthusiastic about moving primary dates. Despite extensive debate, the Joint State Government Committee’s 2000 work produced no substantial change.

More recently, Governor Rendell commissioned an elections taskforce which recommended a change in the state primary calendar. But the Governor never followed up by vigorously advocating change to the legislature.

Now a legislator from Dauphin County wants to remedy the problem. Representative Ron Buxton has introduced a bill that would move Pennsylvania’s presidential primary election up about seven weeks from its present date in the third week in April to the first week in March. This coincides with “Super Tuesday,” a day on which ten other states hold their own primaries (roughly one third of the national primary vote).

Buxton’s proposal won’t move Pennsylvania to the front of the line. Many other states, including California, Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Jersey, and South Carolina, will have voted before Pennsylvania. But Buxton’s bill would move Pennsylvania’s presidential primary forward enough to give the state some role in the process.

The case for changing the date is compelling:
Presently Pennsylvania is virtually ignored in the crucial nominating process, compromising the power and influence of the state in national politics—a result that is particularly untimely given the state will continue to lose congressional seats. Moving the primary could help restore some of Pennsylvania’s eroding political power.

Equally compelling is the critical importance of Pennsylvania in the fall election. Pennsylvania is pivotal in the fall electoral strategies of both parties because it could swing either Republican or Democratic in the Electoral College. Yet absurdly, state voters play no meaningful role in the nomination process. Pennsylvania’s voters may well determine who wins the presidency, but have nothing to say at all about who gets to run for the presidency.

March voting by Pennsylvanians would moderate the ideological and demographic skewing produced from having early voting in Iowa and New Hampshire. Neither of these states’ voters are very representative of the national electorate. Even if the Democrats add two other early states to the calendar, Pennsylvania voters—both moderate and centrist—are more nearly a microcosm of the national electorate. Making Pennsylvania important in the nominating process could help push both national parties toward the center of the political spectrum.

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. Similar bills have been introduced, but none has ever passed.

A variety of reasons are offered by legislators loathe to change the primary date—most of them citing cost and logistics. The deeper reason is both more familiar and less acceptable: resistance to change and politics. Legislators are comfortable with the current schedule and don’t want to add uncertainty to their own nominations, or to be inconvenienced with a re-nomination process that would begin during the December holiday period.

To some, maintaining the comfortable status quo is more important than seeing Pennsylvania exercise its legitimate influence. So, no one should think changing the primary date will be easy; powerful interests are arrayed against it, interests that have blocked it before.

But it could be different this time. Reform is in the air, and what reform could be timelier than restoring Pennsylvania to its appropriate role in presidential primaries? One struggles to conjure up a reform that would cost less and accomplish more than this one.

Governor Rendell has a key role here. His own elections taskforce has recommended change and the Governor is on the record as favoring an earlier presidential primary. But active gubernatorial support for the proposal is also needed—and it is precisely the lack of vigorous gubernatorial action for reforms that have doomed so many earlier proposals.

The stakes are high. Pennsylvania’s electorate is now effectively disenfranchised insofar as presidential nominations are concerned. The state pays a high price for this outrage, as does the nation as a whole. We have a unique chance now to do something about it. We should make the most of this opportunity.

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Politically Uncorrected™ is published twice monthly. Dr. G. Terry Madonna is a Professor of Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College, and Dr. Michael Young is a former Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Penn State University and Managing Partner at Michael Young Strategic Research. The opinions expressed in