What’s wrong with our national system of presidential nominations? A better question might be: What isn’t wrong with it?

Unfortunately, not much.

Originally a democratic reform produced by the Progressive Era in the early 20th century to wrest presidential nominations from party bosses and take nomination decisions out of smoke filled rooms--it now has become a confused clutter of chaotic contests costing millions, lasting seemingly forever, and interesting very few.

It’s a process gone awry.

Essentially, the presidential nominating process has mutated into a two-year marathon campaign extravaganza, stoked by big media, sustained by the need to raise big money, and ignored by most voters. In fact, less than one in ten voters participated in 2004.

Once upon a time, it did have both purpose and meaning. It used to be a contest to win or at least survive the first two big delegate selection events: the Iowa caucus and the New Hampshire primary. It gave presidential candidates a chance to take their cause to the people retail-style, and it provided opportunity for candidates without national reputations to offer their ideas without spending the vast resources needed to compete nationally against well known opponents.

Iowa caucused, New Hampshire voted, and then the rest of the country followed at respectable intervals, holding state caucuses or primaries stretching from February to June of election years. It wasn’t perfect; nevertheless it worked well enough to support a nominating system that produced reasonable consensus in both major parties for almost a half century.

Not everyone liked it. From the beginning it garnered criticism--criticism that has picked up steam in the past two decades. And not just a few of the complaints came from rival states that came to resent the influence of New Hampshire and Iowa in the early process.

The thrust of the criticism was that Iowa and New Hampshire were unrepresentative of larger more diverse states and skewed the nomination selection to extremist in both parties, liberals for the Democrats and conservatives for the Republicans.

As pressures built up in states voting late, "delegate creep" set in; states one by one frontloaded the process and moved their primaries earlier and earlier.

Increasingly, the consequence of the furious frontloading trend became apparent. Presidential nominations now relied on a hodgepodge of haphazard primaries and caucuses in both parties that effectively ended competition by mid March. Any state choosing delegates after March was holding a meaningless contest.
Now in 2007, the dam has finally broken as states rush pell-mell to join the delegate hunt. The rush to frontload the delegate selection process has produced its ultimate denouement; some twenty five states with more than half the national population are likely to move their primary dates to February 5.

Some commentators have referred to the impending February elections as a "national primary," but if it’s a national primary, it’s one in which half the states will be AWOL. It could more accurately be called the "hit or miss primary," with more than 40% of the population effectively disenfranchised.

A real national primary with all states participating is worth considering, but this hit-or-miss-Rube Goldberg-style primary now impending works even more mischief than our present system. It will make presidential campaigns even longer, require candidates to begin running even earlier, compel them to raise even more money, and provide even fewer opportunities for late entrees and dark horses.

By any measure, this is a system in disarray. With no one in charge, each state is free to adjust the primary schedule pretty much as they choose. No selection process for any leader anywhere chosen in any democracy is subject to more uncertainty or less stability from year to year.

Worse than any of this is the corroding effect it has on the presidential selection process. The debate is not which candidate can lead the nation but which can survive the ordeals of an ever changing process, not who has the best credentials but who can raise enough money, not whether a candidate is prepared to be president but whether a candidate will be pushed out by a scandal, not who has the best policies but who has the best pollster, and so on.

The time has clearly come for an overhaul of the entire chaotic process. A plethora of proposals have been offered in the past decade—many promising to bring some sanity to this process now so run amuck.

A real national primary with every state participating is one option. At least all Americans would have some role in the process. But probably better options exist among the several versions of the regional primary plans that have been proposed.

Common to all the regional plans, a designated region of the country (i.e. northeast, south, west and central) would vote in alternate months beginning in February of the presidential year.

The so-called American plan would create ten multi-state primaries to be held over a twenty week interval beginning in February. The American plan gives small and medium states earlier primaries and larger states later primaries.

A competing plan known as the Delaware plan would create regions by allocating each state into one of four population clusters based on population. As with the American plan, smaller states would vote first.

The best of the bunch may be the regional plan promulgated by the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS). It would group each state into one of four regions (east, south, Midwest, and west). Each region would rotate every four years so all states would have a chance to vote first every four election cycles. Voting would begin in March and continue through April, May, and June.
Congress will have to act to bring any of these to fruition. Neither the states acting alone nor the major political parties have been able to rationalize the process. Presidential elections are national campaigns and we need national legislation to make sense of it.

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