Pennsylvania's Primary Problem
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Do you remember the rising excitement last year as the state prepared to vote in the presidential primary? Are you still savoring that exalted feeling from knowing that your state was instrumental in nominating the next president and vice-president of the United States?

Will you always cherish the knowledge that your primary 2004 vote mattered in setting the nation's destiny for the next four years and beyond? Are you looking forward already to the 2008 presidential primary--likely to be the most intense battle in a political generation?

If you can answer yes to any of these questions, we know something very important about you--you don't live in Pennsylvania!

You don't live in Pennsylvania because Pennsylvanians can't do any of those things during presidential primaries. In fact, all Pennsylvanians can do during primaries is to cast futile votes in a meaningless election--an election that is meaningless because by the time Pennsylvanians vote, the primary contests in both national parties are settled. It's all over, completely over.

Nor is this a recent development. Pennsylvania's role in the selection of presidential candidates has been in long and steady decline. Not since 1976 has Pennsylvania voted in time to influence substantially nominees of either party. In the last several elections it has only become worse, as state after state has "front loaded" their primary date. Pennsylvania's growing irrelevancy in presidential primaries has not gone completely unnoticed. Prior to the 2000 election, the state legislature's Joint State Government Committee established a bi-partisan task force to study the election calendar.

Proposals for change were made, but reaction to them was mostly negative--largely coming from election administrators stressing the cost and 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 positive results.

But now Governor Rendell wants to change things. He has created a commission to review a number of voting questions, including the use of provisional ballots and dividing the state's Electoral College votes proportionately. One of the most provocative of these proposals will be changing the date of the presidential primary.

What are the options? The most obvious is to change the date of the Pennsylvania primary to an earlier date, preferably early March. That would force candidates to campaign in Pennsylvania, providing that Iowa and New Hampshire are not decisive. Typically, the process continues at least several more weeks after New Hampshire.
The case for moving Pennsylvania’s presidential primary voting up to March is compelling in terms of the state's national interests. Presidential primaries are now the de facto route to the presidential nomination for both major parties. Some 36 states and territories now hold their primary or caucus by late March of a presidential election year. Pennsylvania’s late primary, which occurs in April, in effect, removes the state from any important influence in the nomination process.

There is a jarring irony here. Typically, Pennsylvania is at the epicenter of the fall campaign. Along with Ohio and Florida, it was the most visited state by the candidates in the 2004 presidential contest. But while Pennsylvania figures importantly in the fall Electoral College strategy of both parties, the state has virtually no influence in the crucial primary nomination process. March voting would mean the state was a player not just in determining who gets elected but in who gets nominated as well.

Moving the primary to March promises other benefits too:

- March voting by Pennsylvanians would moderate the ideological and demographic skew now felt from effects of the early voting in Iowa and New Hampshire. Neither states voter's are very representative of the national electorate. Pennsylvania voters could help push both parties to the center of the political spectrum.
- March voting will also enhance Pennsylvania's national political clout. It would help restore some of Pennsylvania's eroding political power, a goal that is particularly timely as the state continues to lose congressional seats because of slow population growth.
- March voting might also alleviate one of the most disturbing electoral problems evident today--declining voter turnouts. A March presidential primary is all but certain to raise turnout. In 2004, fewer than 25-percent of registered Democrats and 28-percent of Republicans turned out in their respective party primaries. Never has something so important been left to so few.

No one should think the task before the Rendell Commission will be easy. Assume it will be hard. Change is not a political habit in Pennsylvania. Moreover, powerful interests are arrayed against it, interests that have blocked it before. Maintaining the comfortable status quo is more important to some than seeing Pennsylvania exercise its legitimate and necessary influence.

But for the first time gubernatorial leadership is being offered to make Pennsylvania relevant again. And 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; so does the nation as a whole. We have a unique chance now to do something about it. We should make the most of that opportunity.

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