The Compelling Case for Moving the Pennsylvania Primaries

March 2000

As the April 4, 2000, primary approaches, Pennsylvania once again prepares to vote in a presidential primary that doesn't matter. It doesn't matter because some 36 states will have already voted before Pennsylvanians go to the polls, and a large majority of the convention delegates have already been selected. Both the Republican and Democratic presidential nominees are known. It's all over—even the shouting.

Nor does this represent anything new. Not since 1976 has Pennsylvania voted in time to substantially influence the nomination in either party and in the last several elections the state has had no meaningful involvement in the nomination process. As state after state has frontloaded their primaries, Pennsylvania has become the grand-national caboose.

But, it doesn't have to be that way.

Currently the legislature's Joint State Government Committee has established a Bi-partisan task force to study the states primary calendar. The thrust of the changes being studied would move future presidential primaries to March and other primaries to September.

Early reactions to these proposals have been mostly negative—largely coming from election administrators stressing the cost and logistical challenges associated with the proposed changes. Nor have our politicians in general been enthusiastic about moving primary dates. To be sure, the costs and other administrative problems are real and deserve consideration. But this is not an issue that should be decided by budget considerations and administrative hurdles alone. There are many more important considerations.

In particular, the arguments for moving the presidential primary to March are compelling in terms of our state's national interests. Presidential primaries are now the de facto route to the presidential nomination for both major parties and the nomination contest itself is that vital process by which voters reduce the number of possible candidates from many to two. Pennsylvania's April primary in effect removes our state from any important influence in that process. Despite Pennsylvania's population and political prominence—the state is virtually ignored in the crucial nominating process. By the time the voting occurs in Pennsylvania, the contests in both national parties are over.

But moving the primary to March would allow Pennsylvania to join the now long list of states having earlier primaries or caucuses. Moving Pennsylvania's presidential primary to March would also restore some of the states lost political leverage—an action that might seem particularly timely since we are poised to lose two and possibly three congressional seats in the upcoming census.
It also is likely to have a positive effect on one of the most disturbing electoral problems with which we grapple—declining voter turnout. Higher voter turnout is closely associated with the presence of important and competitive races on the ballot, so a March presidential primary is all but certain to raise turnout.

Moving the dates of Pennsylvania's primary will not be easily accomplished. Change is not a political habit in Pennsylvania. Moreover, incumbent legislators understand the current electoral schedule. They intensely dislike uncertainty in a process that plays a major role in their political survival. But the stakes are high here. Pennsylvania's electorate is now effectively disenfranchised insofar as presidential nominations are concerned. Our state's political influence is compromised by it. This is no longer acceptable and we must change it.

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