One definition of crazy is to keep doing diligently the same thing over and over when it’s not working. By that definition, America’s presidential primary system is seriously loony for, with respect to developing a democratic process to nominate candidates for president, we have been doing the same thing over and over again for more than 60 years, and it’s not working.

The glaring evidence of that failure looms before us as the nation awaits the imminent Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primary now scheduled for early January--both nomination events take place in small unrepresentative states that will largely dominate if not determine the rest of the primary process. Iowa and New Hampshire were supposed to be the warm up acts for the remainder of the primaries, but instead they have once again become the main event.

It was not supposed to be like this: not in 1948 when the modern presidential primary began with high hopes of opening up the process; nor in 1952 when early television began to cover primary events, and Eisenhower’s nomination seemed to confirm the efficacy of primaries; nor in 1960 when Kennedy sealed his nomination by winning key primaries; nor after 1968 when major reforms wrestled power from party bosses. Nor was it supposed to happen in any of the subsequent efforts since then to broaden the primary process beyond a few early states.

Nevertheless, the entire nominating apparatus is again fixated on Iowa and New Hampshire, resulting in more candidate visits than ever, more media coverage than ever, more TV commercials than ever, and more money spent than ever. Once again the outcome of a presidential race may depend on the results of two small unrepresentative states.

In this cycle, as in cycles past, major efforts have been made by party leaders to bring some balance to the primary process. To help, the Democrats scheduled Nevada after the "big two" to add an ethnically diverse state to the mix, but it has received scant attention and has been completely irrelevant in the process. Maybe that is because Hillary Clinton has a huge lead there, but maybe because it has no history of mattering.

Then two big important states, Florida and Michigan, moved their primaries into January to lessen the impact of Iowa and New Hampshire. But the national parties responded by stripping the delegations of their national convention votes. Democratic candidates even have been forbidden to campaign in Florida, the state at the center of the 2000 election and one of the three most important states in the last two national elections. No one really believes that Florida and Michigan delegates won’t be in their seats at their respective parties’ national conventions, do they?

Worse perhaps is the pandemonium unleashed in the rush to create Super Duper Tuesday. It is now clear that the mega 22-state delegate selection day scheduled for February 5 has only aggravated the underlying problem. The rush to be relevant and live within the party rules caused states in pell-mell fashion to move their primaries into the dead of winter. So there is now such a mishmash of them that their votes might well just cancel each
other out. In the end, this again will mean that the same early small states as always will likely determine the nominees, but it will merely take a month less than in previous cycles. And this is what we call reform.

But why have well intended reform efforts to make primaries a more deliberative and democratic process so utterly failed? It’s a good question and too rarely asked.

In theory, competitive party primaries should have produced a broadly supported consensus nominee, more party unity, and more open conventions. That’s certainly what early reformers like Robert La Follette expected when he championed the first primaries in Wisconsin in 1908. But since the primary system became dominant in the 1960’s, few of these early expectations of the progressives have been realized.

Part of the answer is the fragmentation of the process and the nature of federalism itself. Presidential elections are 50 separate state elections for the electoral votes of each state, not a national election. And our nominating procedures are controlled by 50 different states within the parties’ rules limitations that vote at widely different times over a six month process. When the early states vote, many voters in other states have not thought deeply about their choices. But the intense and concentrated coverage for Iowa and New Hampshire introduces candidates to a national electorate as de facto "winners" or "losers" before more than 90% of voters can cast ballots.

Consequently winners in New Hampshire and Iowa get an enormous bounce while losers, with rare exceptions (Clinton in 1992), are unable to overcome weak performances in these early contests. Scholars argue whether the combination of media spin or electoral results produces a bandwagon effect that makes later voters gravitate to earlier winners. But there is no argument that, after Iowa and New Hampshire have voted, the race is probably over.

It is now too late to change this process for 2008. But it’s exactly the right time to consider changes for 2012 and beyond. The time has clearly come for an overhaul of the entire chaotic process.

Two major options exist. One would produce a national primary while the second option provides for the adoption of regional primaries. A real national primary with every state participating on the same day has been proposed since at least 1916 when Woodrow Wilson advocated it. Its major strength is that potentially all Americans would have some role in the process.

Several versions of regional primary plans also 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. One regional plan, the so-called American Plan, would give 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.

Congress will have to act to bring any of these plans to fruition. And Congress should act. Sixty years of hard experience have taught us that 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 them.