A Crazy System

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One definition of crazy is to keep doing something that's never worked, while expecting it will be different this time. That's a bull's eye description of the loony system used to nominate candidates for the U.S. Presidency. Every four years, we try again hoping against hope that this time it will work.

In fact, we now hardly notice how nutty the process has become. To get some perspective on its sheer lunacy, consider how it might work in Pennsylvania in non-presidential contests.

Imagine for a moment that one or both of Pennsylvania's two political parties need to nominate a candidate for statewide office. It could be any office, but let's make the example interesting, the election of the state's governor.

Now, further suppose that for some reason the present statewide primary system did not exist. Maybe no one ever invented it, or it just seemed too complicated or expensive. Maybe the reigning political powers saw statewide primaries threatening to their local power.

So, nominations are handled at the county level—in all 67 of them. And each county gets to make up its rules as it goes along. For example, some counties vote on nominees in countywide elections. Other counties hold "caucuses" to nominate, while still others let local party officials do the job.

One of the twists in our imaginary nominating system is that no one tells the counties when to vote. Some counties go early in the year and some late. It's quite a hodgepodge. The earliest county to vote is sparsely populated Perry County in the center of the state. It's a mostly rural population, involved heavily in agriculture.

Truth be told, Perry is not very representative demographically or ideologically of the rest of Pennsylvania. But it has been first so long that both press and candidates flock to it and settle there for months prior to voting day. Perry doesn't actually get to determine nominees by itself, but it winnows the field down to three or fewer.

The job of getting the field down to just two or maybe just one goes to tiny Forest County in the north country. Since Perry uses a caucus to nominate, Forest is actually the first county to have a countywide primary election.

No one remembers how it evolved that Forest County, small and remote, got to be first. But the county economy has become dependent on the hordes of journalist, candidates, campaign staffs, and others that troop into town every four years. Most observers believe local officials would rather cut down every tree in the county than give up their priority position.

A handful of bigger and medium sized counties will vote soon after Forest—and then over the next four months or so all the other counties will vote—some on the same day, and others by themselves.
But after Forest County votes, the nominee will be pretty clear. Candidates who don't do well in Perry or Forest Counties drop out because they have trouble attracting financial support or media attention.

Some people find it strange that only a couple of small and unrepresentative counties have so much clout over the nomination, while the bigger and more populous counties have little or no influence. Some have even argued that the best candidates are not chosen this way.

Change, however, doesn't seem to be in the cards. As noted Perry and Forest Counties like the system the way it is now. And the Republican and Democrat Parties can't seem to agree on a better system. A few people snidely suggest that party leaders like the present system because they can control it.

Happily this imaginary nominating system doesn't exist in Pennsylvania. Unhappily, however, a particularly virulent version of it determines the way we nominate presidential candidates.

The month-long ordeal just completed in Iowa is a case in point. Created as an historical anomaly, Iowa (think Perry County) guards its front-runner status with the zealousness of a lioness guarding her cubs. At stake in Iowa are less than 2-percent of all delegates who will attend the Democratic convention. Yet, among candidates contesting Iowa, none placing lower than third ever won a party nomination.

Next in the nomination schedule comes the New Hampshire primary (think Forest County). It has even fewer delegates at stake for both parties than Iowa. And large numbers of independent voters participate in the primary.

By the time New Hampshire has voted, the race is down to one or two candidates. Many good candidates have withdrawn or have been so wounded they cannot recover. Two small, mostly rural and very unrepresentative, states have sealed the deal.

How did this nomination nightmare come about? Like so many "reforms", it started with the best of intentions, emerging as a by-product of challenges to boss control of the national conventions, and the effort to include young people, women, and minorities in presidential nominations.

The reforms were supposed to bring more voters into the process, heighten interest in the nomination contest, and make the process more open and more representative.

In fact, unintended consequences soon occurred. Voting turnout in the caucuses and the primary elections since 1972 has mostly been anemic. Worse perhaps, the process is essentially over before more than half of the states have had an opportunity to participate, leaving the voters in those states to play no role in the nomination.

Nor are the delegates' chosen very representatives of rank and file voters. Studies have shown that Democratic convention attendees are wealthier, more liberal, and more likely to be in public service than typical Democratic identifiers. Similarly, Republicans are better off and more conservative than Republican voters. And for what do we incur these costs? Certainly better presidents haven't been a consequence. There is no evidence that the nomination system now in place has led to the nomination of presidential candidates who
are superior to the old pre-1968 method of nomination. Great leaders like Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and the two Roosevelts were all nominated without the ordeal now underway.

What to do? Many worthy solutions have been proposed, including regional primaries and even a national primary. Some of the options are better than others, but none of them are worse than what we now have.

But the solutions can be worked on later. What seems important first is to acknowledge a system gone completely haywire--and beyond any mere tinkering. We need to fundamentally re-think how we go about nominating a president. It would be crazy not to.

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