Ditch the Primary

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The presidential nominating system now used in the United States is the equivalent of a political ponzi scheme. Front-end loaded primaries ensure that a handful of early voting states determine the presidential nominee of the major parties. What follows for the remainder of the states is enormous voter apathy toward presidential primary elections and a growing sense that party nominations are rigged. That’s the bad news.

The good news is that the bad news has finally stirred some serious discussion and debate on the merits of modifying the nominating process. At long last, political leaders are discussing reforms that might return some sanity to the quadrennial process by which we nominate presidential candidates.

The national Republicans seem headed toward adopting a version of the so-called Delaware Plan. Under it, all the states would vote in four staggered groups over four months, with smaller states voting first and larger states last. The national Democrats are not enthusiastic about the Delaware Plan, but are exploring other reform plans. One alternate proposal being discussed is the Rotating Regional Primary, advocated by the National Secretaries of State. Under this proposal, the various states would vote the same day as other states in their region, but the regional order of voting would rotate every four years.

Other proposals are being circulated. Each of the proposed new systems has advantages and disadvantages for Pennsylvania. Arguably Pennsylvania, as a large state, would do better in a regional system than one in which large states always vote last. The larger point, however, is that the present system is a mess, and some version of reform eventually could be adopted by the two major political parties.

Pennsylvania can best fit into a national scheme and serve its own best interests by abolishing its current closed primary system and by becoming a caucus state. The arguments for the elimination of the primary and the adoption of a caucus are surprisingly strong:

Low turnout and dismal public interest in primary elections. Good reason exists to rethink the whole idea of having voters’ select convention delegates, particularly for those states that don’t vote early. In Pennsylvania, barely 22% of the state’s registered voters cast ballots in the April 4, 2000, presidential primary. That is the lowest turnout in modern Pennsylvania history.

Caucuses could reinvigorate interest in the nominating process. Neighborhood meetings might stimulate enthusiasm in what is now a lackluster nominating process. If the caucuses met in late February or early March, they would by far be the largest delegate prize for candidates seeking delegates before the Super Tuesday showdown. The large delegate pool in both parties easily surpasses the number of delegates chosen in any of the early voting states—Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Michigan. Presidential candidates would by necessity shift their attention to Pennsylvania.
Primaries are Byzantine in their complexity. In particular, the public does not understand the internal delegate selection process used by the Democrats and the Republicans. For example, Republican convention delegates run unpledged, which means voters have no clue which Republican presidential candidate their elected delegates support. Meanwhile, the Democrats employ a quota system that permits a losing convention delegate to attend the Democratic convention in place of another delegate who actually received more votes within a congressional district. Got that?

A caucus would provide the party organizations with a meaningful activity, and give local party activists a real role in the nominating process. Given the weaknesses of political parties these days, a caucus could provide an impetus for party building and party activity, long missing from contemporary politics.

On election day, caucuses would be held in precincts or wards to cast presidential preference votes. Those preference votes would be tabulated on a statewide basis for both Democrats and Republicans, thereby giving a total presidential vote for the various presidential candidates in both parties. Caucus goers would cast votes for a certain number of caucus participants to attend a congressional caucus to be held later. The votes cast for caucus participants at these precinct or ward caucus meetings would be based on their support for the various presidential candidates. Each party would hold separate caucuses and select delegates based on state and national party rules. At the final stage, actual convention delegates would be selected at congressional district caucuses and state conventions.

The multi-tiered process may seem unnecessarily complex, but, in fact, it is well suited to Pennsylvania politics. Though weakened considerably in recent decades, Pennsylvania still has a semblance of a party system, which means that the state’s political parties are reasonably organized and somewhat cohesive, and they do have substantial cadres of loyal supporters. Party organizations are active and apparent in statewide elections. They work very well in elections for which the electorate is galvanized and enthusiastic. The problem, however, is that these conditions don’t apply to Pennsylvania’s presidential primaries.

Early twentieth century Progressive reformers were wrong in their belief that direct primaries would engage the electorate to participate in nomination contests. In effect, every four years Pennsylvania’s Democrats and Republicans hold a big party for millions of voters who don’t show up. Meanwhile, the voters who do show up---party activists and core supporters---have limited meaningful participation.

It doesn’t have to be this way. Caucuses could change the nature of Pennsylvania’s presidential nomination process by encouraging meaningful participation, while also making Pennsylvania relevant in the national nominating contest. Caucuses make sense for Pennsylvania. Primaries don’t. Let’s ditch the primary.

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