

Pennsylvania: The Decider

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by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

George Bush famously has described himself as the "decider," referring to his presidential role in determining Iraq war policy. But in 2008 presidential nomination politics, the decider role may fall on no single decision maker but on a single state--and an unlikely state at that--for Pennsylvania has not had any role in selecting presidential nominees for more than thirty years. Not since 1976, as other states have frontloaded their primaries, has Pennsylvania voted in time to influence nominee selection in any meaningful way.

That, however, might well change. Often ignored and usually anticlimactic, Pennsylvania's April 22 primary is poised to become decisive in the Democratic presidential nomination.

The math rather than the politics prevails here. The state's 188 delegates, 103 of them elected out of congressional districts, are the largest prize between the March 4 contest in Texas and Ohio and the end of the delegate selection contests in June. Slicing and dicing the delegates yet to be won, it looks like the nomination cannot be mathematically wrapped up before Pennsylvania votes, making the Keystone State potentially the ultimate umpire. Either a winner is declared out of Pennsylvania or it goes on to overtime and a possible brokered convention.

For Pennsylvania it's been a while. The last time Pennsylvania was decisive in a Democratic race was in 1976 when a coalition of labor party leaders, committed to Henry "Scoop" Jackson, failed to stop Jimmy Carter from winning Pennsylvania and allowing Carter to virtually secure the Democratic nomination. The state was vigorously contested in 1980 when Ted Kennedy's campaign staggered into the state needing to do well to stay alive. Kennedy narrowly won the state over Carter allowing his campaign to hobble toward the convention. In subsequent primaries since 1980, Pennsylvania has merely confirmed the frontrunner status of the likely nominee.

The Keystone State's electorate seems poised to play out a major role in selecting the nominee. Current polling shows that voters are unusually motivated to participate in the primary election indicating a large turnout is likely in the state. In the most recent Franklin & Marshall Poll, some 70 percent of registered Pennsylvanians said they are certain to vote in the primary, and 60 percent indicated they are very interested in the political campaign.

These numbers contrast markedly with voting trends in past presidential primaries. Pennsylvania's primary turnout has varied since 1972, but on average it has been relatively low (about 15 to 20 percent of eligible voters). General interest in the 2008 race combined with a growing sense in the state that Pennsylvania votes might count seems likely to fuel record primary turnouts this year.

The Pennsylvania Democratic electorate that will go to the polls on April 22 is ideologically and demographically well defined. Pre-primary polls taken in presidential primaries since 1972 have shown that Democratic primary voters have tended to be more moderate and centrist in ideology, often belonging to labor unions and Catholic. In a typical primary, for example, almost half were union voters and Catholic, about 15

percent were black or African American, and fewer than 5 percent were Jewish. As a result, moderate candidates have tended to do much better in Pennsylvania: Hubert Humphrey in 1972, Jimmy Carter in 1976, Walter Mondale in 1984, and Bill Clinton in 1992. Edward M. Kennedy's victory in 1980 over Carter was one exception.

Handicapping the Clinton Obama race in Pennsylvania is problematic--largely because there has been little direct campaigning in the state. Hillary Clinton has held sizable leads in the Pennsylvania polls, but these are consistent with the earlier margins she maintained in other states where no actual campaigning had taken place.

Moreover Pennsylvania voters are not firm in their vote choice. The latest Franklin & Marshall Poll found that almost half (46%) of Democrats who expressed a candidate preference indicated they were still making up their mind. When undecided Democrats are added to the mix, nearly three in five (57%) of the state's Democratic votes are still in play.

Still Clinton would be expected to do well in the state. The combination of labor support, a large blue collar ethnic Catholic base, a large number of older voters, and close ties to the political establishment bodes well for her. These are the electoral coalitions that have worked well for her in earlier states. Geographically her vote will come from the old mining and mill towns of the southwest, the home of the blue collar Catholic ethnics, and the old coal regions in the northeast counties, especially Lackawanna and Luzerne.

But Obama will be competitive. He has almost matched her in fundraising, raising 1.5 million to her 2 million in the state. And he has time to cut into her lead as he did in earlier states. There will be seven weeks between the Texas and Ohio primaries on March 4 and April 22--enough time to make Pennsylvania seem like New Hampshire all over again. Geographically Obama's votes will come from the southeast (Philadelphia and its suburbs), where Democratic voters have shown a tendency to vote for more liberal, change oriented candidates in the past.

Philadelphia will be critical to Obama's success in the state. He should capture Philadelphia where more than half of the turnout will consist of black voters. In 1988 Jesse Jackson carried the city by more than 50,000 votes out of 372,000 cast. The equally important Philadelphia suburbs are the home of affluent, educated, and young professionals similar to the voters that have supported Obama in previous primaries. These voters tend to be more socially liberal, strongly oppose the war in Iraq, and by wide margins disapprove of President's Bush's job performance.

One interesting wild card for Obama is the youth vote. Obama has enjoyed strong support from young people, and Pennsylvania has some 100 colleges. Historically turnout among younger voters has been anemic, but their presence represents a clear opportunity for him if he can tap it.

Pennsylvania's role at this moment is not without irony. For almost a decade, state reformers have labored without success to move the state's primary date forward on the election calendar so that Pennsylvania might have some influence on the nomination process. Now it appears that influence may be at hand, not because of anything the state did--but precisely because it did nothing.

*Politically Uncorrected*TM is published twice monthly. Dr. G. Terry Madonna is a Professor of Public Affairs

at Franklin & Marshall College, and Dr. Michael Young is a former Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Penn State University and Managing Partner at Michael Young Strategic Research. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any institution or organization with which they are affiliated. This article may be used in whole or part only with appropriate attribution. Copyright © 2008 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.