Pennsylvania has a political problem—its both chronic and serious. State voters are virtually disenfranchised from presidential nominations. Every four years, while presidential wannabes are being whittled down from the many to the few to just two, Pennsylvania stands passively aside waiting for other states to choose for us.

And choose for us they do. Not since 1976 has Pennsylvania had even a remote role in nominating presidential candidates. To put some perspective on it: In 1976, Milton Shapp was governor; Jerry Ford was in the White House; Mao Tse-Tung was still running China; and the Steelers had just defeated Dallas in the Super Bowl. It was a long time ago.

It may seem shocking that a state of twelve million is effectively shut out of presidential nominations, but it is no mystery why it happens. It happens because Pennsylvania holds its presidential primary so late that both party’s nomination contest are long over by the time the state votes.

The consequences of Pennsylvania’s chronic lateness to vote are multiple and serious: one is voter apathy and anemic turnout. With presidential primaries meaningless, three quarters of the electorate is unlikely to vote in any given year.

In 2000, just about 22-percent of the state’s registered voters turned out, a record low for modern presidential primaries, and in 2004 the turnout was only marginally better, with about one in four casting ballots.

Equally serious if less tangible costs include the erosion of Pennsylvania’s political clout in Washington. In the real world, politicians care about voters who vote and states that matter. The harsh truth is that most Pennsylvanians don’t vote in presidential nominations and Pennsylvania doesn’t matter.

That’s the problem, simply stated, but the solution has defied easy fixing. How to make the state relevant has been studied ad nauseum. A task force appointed by Governor Rendell is studying it again.

The curative medicine proposed in the past has been to move the primary to early or mid March. Alas, this obvious if not easy solution has been a bitter pill state legislators have been unwilling to gulp down. In fact, moving the primary to March brings groans to county election officials and state legislators alike. The strong expectation now in Harrisburg is that the legislature will not vote to change the primary to early March.

But there is yet another solution to Pennsylvania’s debilitating disenfranchisement, a solution we proposed first in 2000 and believe is still viable: Pennsylvania could keep the May primary for state and local nominations, but ditch the primary altogether for presidential nominations—ditch it and go to a caucus system. Pennsylvania could become a caucus state.

Caucuses are now used in thirteen states. Here’s how it might work in Pennsylvania: on Election Day in early March, caucus meetings would be held in precincts or wards to cast votes for presidential candidates. Each political party would organize their own local meetings.
At these meetings the attendees could debate items for inclusion in theirs respective party platforms and select a number of caucus goers to attend caucus meetings at the next level (congressional districts). Presidential preference votes from each local caucus would be tabulated on statewide basis, thereby giving a total vote for the various presidential candidates.

Later, at the congressional district caucus actual convention delegates would be selected, as determined by state and party rules. So-called super delegates and the other allotted delegate spots would continue to be selected at state party meetings.

The arguments for eliminating the primary and substituting a caucus are surprisingly strong. In particular, caucuses are well suited to Pennsylvania politics. It is somewhat remarkable in fact that Pennsylvania hasn’t instituted caucuses before.

Certainly caucuses are a good fit for Pennsylvania’s political system: the state still has a reasonably strong party system; moreover the parties are competently organized and cohesive, with substantial cadres of loyal supporters, and local party leaders are more than capable of handling caucus meetings.

Nor are Caucuses unusually byzantine in their operation. Delegate selection in primaries is certainly no simpler. Republican delegates in Pennsylvania primaries, for example, run un-pledged, which means most voters have no clue which presidential candidates the delegates support. Meanwhile, Pennsylvania Democrats employ a quota system, permitting a losing delegate to attend the national convention in place of another delegate candidate who got more votes. Caucuses can be confusing--yes, but so are the existing primaries.

Three other strong arguments favor caucuses for presidential nominations:

- **POLITICAL CLOUT**—Pennsylvania caucuses held in early March would provide a huge cache of delegates, easily surpassing the delegates available in most other early voting states. By necessity, presidential candidates would be forced to focus attention in the state. At long last Pennsylvania would be relevant again.

- **VOTER PARTICIPATION**—Turnout in the existing primary is dismal. Caucuses can only improve this performance. Caucuses will reinvigorate interest in the nominating process by stimulating activity at the precinct and ward grass roots. Voters would not only vote for their favorite presidential candidate, but also participate in meetings debating the party platform and voting for convention delegates.

- **PARTY BUILDING**—Caucuses would give party organizations a meaningful activity while giving rank and file party activists a real role in the nominating process. Caucuses would also tend to strengthen grassroots party organization and provide an impetus for party building. Given the organizational weakness of parties these days, this is not a trivial benefit.

The state legislature has an opportunity again to both make the state a player in presidential nominations and to encourage citizen participation. It has two practical options to achieve these objectives--move the primary earlier or ditch it entirely in favor of caucuses.

Either way, Pennsylvania is a winner. As things stand now, few of us vote and none of us count. Doing nothing at all is the only way to make things worse.
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