

Democrats Make a Presidential Shift, Opting for the Money Primary

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Question: How do you increase the influence of minorities and working people in the selection of the next Democratic presidential candidate?

Answer: Add Nevada and South Carolina to the first two weeks of the schedule.

That's what the Democrats voted to do this week, and supposedly they did it to make the process of picking a candidate for president in 2008 more representative of the diversity of the party. But watch out. If a few decades as what we call a "rules junkie" has taught me anything, it's to watch out for unintended consequences. And this rules change has that old story written all over it.

For as long as I've been around, Democrats have been trying to figure out whether the Iowa/New Hampshire system is a problem to be fixed or an advantage to be kept, or really long since ceased to exist in real life anyway.

By that I mean the myth that in presidential politics, a relatively unknown candidate, say the one-term governor of a Southern state like Georgia, could virtually move to Iowa, do better than expected there, capitalize on that momentum and transfer it to another small state (New Hampshire). Then, with the momentum of those two victories behind him, overtake the better-financed opponents in perhaps a third state and go on to win the nomination.

That is, to a large extent, what happened in 1976. The candidate that year, Jimmy Carter, went on, of course, to be elected president. But for the last 30 years, Democrats have worked hard to change the rules so that what happened in 1976 will not happen again.

Since that time, it is fair to say that the well-financed candidates have won, for reasons that are not coincidental; increasingly, the process has been structured to reward well-financed candidates by moving more and more contests to the beginning (so you need more and more money to get started and keep going).

In the process, other states have continuously been gunning for Iowa and New Hampshire, trying to figure out how to reduce their still substantial influence on the process. Because the ironic and somewhat counterintuitive impact of moving up states has been to increase the impact of these earlier states in sorting through the field: by the time New Hampshire is over, the race is usually down to two candidates and all but decided.

What to do about it? Maybe nothing. Enter this year's scheme. With much opposition, especially from New Hampshire, the Democratic Party voted last week to move the Nevada caucus to five days after Iowa — before the New Hampshire primary — and to move the South Carolina primary to one week after New Hampshire. That means four states in two weeks.

Under current proposals, the calendar looks like this for 2008: Iowa caucus, Jan. 14; Nevada caucus, Jan. 19; New Hampshire primary, Jan. 22; South Carolina primary Jan. 29.

The theory is that since Nevada has Hispanics and labor unions and South Carolina has blacks, you make the early states more diverse by including these two as well as the "whiter" Iowa and New Hampshire.

But consider the most obvious point here: What will it take to put together an operation, beginning next January, to compete in those four states at the same time? With no momentum coming from anywhere?

Money. So the first way to look at the new changes announced this week by the democrats is that it increases the role of the money primary. If you can't compete aggressively in four states at once, you can't play.

Who plays in the money primary?

Hispanics? African Americans? Working people?

I don't think so. Let's put it this way. It's whiter than Iowa.

The second purpose of the rules change was supposedly to reduce the influence of Iowa and New Hampshire. Will adding Nevada and South Carolina do that, or will it make the two traditional contests count for more?

Not clear. Consider that it used to be that you could recover from a disappointing showing in Iowa by doing better in New Hampshire. But now if you disappoint in Iowa, you turn around and you're in Nevada before you have time to breathe, making it harder to recover and making Iowa possibly more important. Then you turn around, and you are literally in New Hampshire. By that time you will have candidates who are 0 for 3 and completely out of it. They won't even make it to South Carolina a week later. Mark my words.

Then again, it could all work out completely differently. The first time the Southern states got together to increase their influence on the nomination process, by moving to a single date, in the hopes of moderating the leftward swing of the party, some of them were shocked to discover that the result was a boon for candidate Jesse Jackson. The next time it worked for Bill Clinton. You never know.

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