

Extend the season

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

The Green Bay Packers won their first two preseason games this year, which meant exactly nothing in the National Football League. To win it all, the Pack will have to get to the Super Bowl on Feb. 3 and win it.

But if the rules of presidential politics applied to the NFL, the Packers could have laid an early claim on the Lombardi Trophy in August.

In the game of nominating a president, which begins with the Iowa caucuses, it's often a very short season. And that's a shame because a full season of primaries and caucuses would better serve voters. Congress should give top priority to creating a regional primary system that would change the rules of this slapdash game.

The pressure to reform the freewheeling system of caucuses and primaries has been building for years but became more urgent after states raced to the front of the political calendar to gain leverage. As a result, the calendar is jammed through Feb. 5, when voters in more than 20 states go to the polls.

The game may end abruptly that night if candidates in the two major parties score knockouts, and if that happens, the Feb. 19 primary in Wisconsin, and votes in many other states thereafter, will become pointless.

Sens. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., Joseph Lieberman, I-Conn., and Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., are proposing a regional system that preserves traditional first-in-the-nation voting in Iowa and New Hampshire but allows for rotating primaries by blocks of states in the Midwest, West, South and East. Each would take turns going first, and balloting would be spread out through June.

The parties should have imposed this discipline on themselves a long time ago. "Both parties have made good faith efforts to do this but have failed, largely because some power center within the party believed that clean competition was bad for the power center and used its power to block reform," Alexander said in congressional testimony last fall.

A system that relies so heavily on voters in two unrepresentative states such as Iowa and New Hampshire followed by a mad dash through a couple of dozen other states makes no sense. Fewer than 50,000 Iowans voted for Sen. John Kerry in 2004 and only about 84,000 New Hampshire voters selected him in that state's primary, Alexander noted. "Kerry may have been the strongest candidate, but we'll never know, since, in presidential nomination politics, we never play the whole season," he said.

Extending that season in a coordinated way would better serve the process and allow voters around the country to have their say.

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