

No more early presidential primaries

by Herbert G. Klein

As the "grand" experiment in early primaries rolls on toward Pennsylvania, it is time for the nation's political parties to reassess the value of this radical change in American elections.

In my opinion, early primaries create more confusion than clarity for the scrutiny of presidential candidates.

The early primaries have succeeded in only one category. They have brought out increased turnouts in Democratic elections and have gained interest among young people. Most of that, however, can be credited to the youth surge behind Barack Obama.

It seems logical that the Obama surge would have occurred whether there were late primaries or early ones. The surge was boosted by Obama's oratory and personality.

As for other factors, the benefits for early primaries have been negative to voter understanding of the issues of this presidential race. The multiple debates, a product of early primaries, have focused more on oratory and side issues rather than debate on major issues. Debates have become so frequent that interest in them has diminished.

The pundits predicted that the party nominees would be determined on "Super Tuesday" in February. That did not happen in either party. The eventual Republican nominee, John McCain, was labeled "dead in the water" after the first caucus in Iowa. He surprised the media with a comeback election in New Hampshire. Then came "Super Tuesday" where the results in both parties were mixed.

The early primaries have made the 2008 election process the most expensive in history. More money has been raised and spent on primary elections than has been spent on previous general elections.

Other than technical differences between the health plan of Hillary Clinton and Obama, there have been no thorough discussions of other major national issues. There has been mention of Iraq troop withdrawals, but the debate has centered more on withdrawal dates than on the merit of withdrawal. None of the candidates have gone into detail on the effect the timing of a withdrawal would have on the entire Middle East.

The economy gained little attention on "Super Tuesday" and has become a major subject only recently.

It is clear from the Democratic debates that the result will be the nomination of the most liberal candidate since George McGovern.

One of the themes of the three final presidential candidates has been a need for less partisanship in the conduct of Congress. The theme sounds great on the campaign trail, but it has no effect on Washington Democratic leaders Nancy Pelosi and Tom Reid. The Democratic Party leaders have not changed their tactics even though their candidates call for less strife.

Whether the Democrats settle on a party nominee prior to their national convention remains a mystery. The Democratic convention may be governed by old-fashioned "boss politics."

The biggest winners from early primaries have been television stations where candidates fight for time. All this after a year of primary contests.

As one looks toward November elections, it is unknown what major issues will demand national attention seven months from now except for the Iraq war and probably the economy. Social Security and other major problems have been forgotten in the year of debates.

There is a real question whether voters will have become bored with debates and campaigns, and the earlier enthusiasm will have decreased.

A decision to change our election procedure from year-long elections to shorter ones is up to the two political parties. They set the current early primary rules, and they can change them. It is not a matter for Congress.

A better way to elect the next president would be to start the normal election procedure in August leading to September national conventions.

A workable plan for short presidential campaigns would include dividing the country politically into four regions. The campaign in each region would be limited to two weeks. The order of campaigning would be on a rotation basis. Each group of states would include large and small states giving each political attention. National conventions also would rotate and be held three or four weeks after the regional elections.

A short campaign would be far less costly and still would focus attention on key issues in each region.

It will take time to work out such a plan, but now is the time for action.

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