

Jockeying for pole position not the best primary reform

by *Herbert_G_Klein*

In the mad scramble among states to determine which ones will play a major role in the 2008 presidential primaries and caucuses, we may be doing serious harm to our presidential nominating process.

California, Florida, Nevada and more states to come are elated by the prospect of playing a major role in the selection of presidential nominees, and they envision millions of dollars in television and campaign revenue. Before this year is out, there may be more than 23 states voting in January and early February.

The biggest question, however, is whether it helps our nation in the selection of the strongest possible nominees for the president of the United States.

I believe the answer is no.

The nation needs shorter presidential campaigns, not longer ones - such as the one we are experiencing now, a date so early that some in New Hampshire may vote absentee before the year 2007 is out.

In recent years each presidential campaign has become more costly, and clearly 2008 will be the most expensive of them all. Hillary Clinton set a high bar when she recently raised \$2.5 million in one night in Hollywood, and that is just the beginning. She led all contenders by raising \$26 million during the first quarter of this year, and total fundraising for the six leading Democrats and Republican candidates in 2007 already exceeds \$110 million.

The candidates who benefit most from surprisingly large amounts of funds raised are Barack Obama and former Michigan Gov. Mitt Romney. Clinton's lead was expected, but Obama and Romney exceeded most forecasts.

Obama's \$25 million raised from 100,000 donors lifts him from the perception of an early "flash in the pan" to a serious contender. Romney, who appears to be fighting against a negative New York Times bias, has raised \$20 million and exceeds all Republicans, including the early favorite, John McCain. He now has the funds to broaden his campaign and gain needed name recognition.

Depending on which way you count, there are 20 candidates currently seeking the presidency. With the high cost of elections in large states such as California and New York, many may be eliminated before they have a fair national chance to discuss their major views on the presidential issues. The New Hampshire primary and

caucuses in Iowa will draw the usual full slate of candidates, and winners will be hailed. But their impact could be lost in one fell swoop on Feb. 5, when California and other large states will vote.

In California, Republicans have gone beyond moving the election date to Feb. 5. They will award convention delegates by congressional districts rather than on the traditional winner-take-all basis. That means California may well be represented at the convention by delegates representing several candidates, not one. In all likelihood, the delegation will be unified by old-fashioned boss politics, decided in closed session at the convention. Popular vote will mean little if anything.

The process of nominating candidates for the presidency has changed frequently over the years. The days of lengthy debates, such as those between Lincoln and Douglas, are mentioned each year when televised debates are discussed, but that time is long gone. So are the boss politics and smoke-filled rooms that were dominant at the turn of the century.

When Gen. Dwight Eisenhower ran for the presidency in 1946, there were only nine primary elections, and little New Hampshire was the state with the most dominant effect. In the 1970s there was major discussion among both Democrats and Republicans about later primary elections, and national conventions moved back to September. Along came Gov. Jimmy Carter, who ran a four-year campaign that changed his position from an unknown, small-state governor to the presidency. The thought of shorter campaigns disappeared.

Campaigning has changed completely since that time. Television, negative advertising and fundraising are the dominant factors today. Candidates fly into town, hold a brief press conference and spend their time with wealthy "fat cats," rarely seeing the public in massive rallies or town meetings. Except for polls, they lose touch with the voting public.

With the new rash of early primary elections, campaign managers will have entirely new decisions to make. None can afford to campaign fully in the many large and small early primaries about to be conducted. Television will substitute for personal appearances. A key question will be: Will the emphasis be on the continued early focus on New Hampshire, Iowa and South Carolina, with the hope that a strong showing in those traditionally early states will affect the upcoming larger states such as California, Florida and New York?

Will the candidates need to spend their early time and money on the big states with dominant numbers of delegates and ignore tradition such as Iowa? Can a win in a large state give a candidate the media thrust to become the leading candidate? New York and California are largely Democratic. How does that affect Republican voters? How does that big-state philosophy help in picking a candidate who is popular in the Midwest or the mountain states? What will the effect be from new use of the Web?

It is too late to change the election process for 2008, but there is time for both parties to consider a more equitable future process of selection.

Former California governor Pete Wilson, California Republican leader Jerry Parsky and many others in both political parties have supported a plan based on shorter campaigns and elections based on regions, not single states.

If both political parties were to agree, the nation could be divided into four regions wherein states could select their own method of nominating. But they would vote in regional clusters during the regions' separate times at bat. The order of the elections would rotate each four years, with the first region voting in mid-June and the last in mid- August. National conventions then could be held in September, with the parties alternating lead roles.

A process such as this would shorten the campaigns and would give each area of the country an equal opportunity for each state to determine its favorite candidate or candidates by caucus or primary vote. Debates could focus on regional as well as national issues.

Whatever policy the nation chooses to follow in the selection of nominees for the presidency, it should be clear that we do not need longer and more expensive negative campaigns that encourage influence-peddling.

There is one other major problem: negative advertising that ignores key issues and stresses deception. Our Constitution is strengthened by its protection of free speech, and it is essential to our democratic process. That means the only way to decrease the attack-dog strategies is for the voters to turn the negative advertising off - reject it. We all talk about how bad negative and often false advertising is, but we keep reacting to it. The answer would be for the voters to support the cleanest campaign, not the hardest hitting.

Unfortunately, that kind of voter reaction is slow in coming.

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