

A better way

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Don't look now, but the first popular votes in the 2008 presidential race may actually be cast in 2007, as states race against each other to move up their primaries in a bid to influence the process. The result is emerging pandemonium on the campaign trail and what is certain to be the most protracted and costliest presidential contest in history.

There has to be a better way. If the Republican and Democratic national committees can't end the chaos, Congress will have to step in with legislation to impose order. The current situation is the antithesis of a thoughtful, democratic procedure for selecting the next occupant of the most powerful office in the world.

The Florida Legislature touched off the latest crisis by moving up its primary to Jan. 29, in defiance of rules set by the national party committees. Other states may vie for even earlier dates. New Hampshire's secretary of state, who has the power to set the primary there, is threatening to schedule it for this December or even earlier if necessary to preserve the state's "first in the nation" status.

The California Legislature earlier contributed to the stampede by moving up its primary to Feb. 5. Its reason for doing so was the same as in Florida - to give the state's voters a voice in the selection of the nominees of both parties. For decades, California voters have cast primary ballots after the nominees were, for all practical purposes, already selected.

As matters now stand, no fewer than 24 states representing 65 million voters will hold primaries or caucuses on Feb. 5. This date now is known as "Tsunami Tuesday" to weary candidates who have no hope of effectively getting out their message and getting known to voters in so many places at one time. The onslaught of contests so early in 2007 puts a premium on the mega-fundraising needed to stage costly television campaigns. It also gives an even greater edge to the better-known contenders and serves to squeeze out newcomers to the field.

What's more, the Feb. 5 avalanche means the nominees of both parties may well be decided more than six months before the party conventions and a full nine months before the general election. Do we really want to make presidential campaigns a never-ending fixture of the political landscape?

The way out of this madness is a national system of rotating regional primaries. Clusters of states with similar interests - say, New England, the South, the Midwest, the West - would cast their ballots on the same day, with each regional election separated by two weeks. In successive presidential contests, different regions would go first, on a rotating basis. Under this scenario, the primary process could be compressed into a few weeks in the late spring, and every voter in the country would have a voice in the selection process.

If the Democratic and Republican national committees are incapable of establishing such a system, Congress will have choice but to intervene.

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