Primary roulette

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Unless you're a hard-core political junkie, you probably don't know who Bill Gardner is or that, right now, he has more to say about who will be the next president of the United States than anyone else in America.

Gardner is New Hampshire's secretary of state. As such, he has sole authority over setting the date for the New Hampshire primary. The "first-in-the-nation" tradition is as important to Granite Staters as the fact that the state levies no personal income or state sales taxes. Well, almost that important.

To protect New Hampshire's quadrennial place on the national political stage, Gardner has been playing a game of calendar chicken with states that want to horn in on New Hampshire's outsized role in narrowing the presidential field. But they can't do that until Gardner sets the date. And he's playing coy.

State law requires the New Hampshire primary to be held on a Tuesday, and least seven days before any other "similar election." With New Year's Day on a Tuesday this year, the first practical Election Day in 2008 is Jan. 8. Gardner was willing to concede that date to Iowa, which uses party caucuses, not primaries, to apportion presidential delegates to the candidates.

But then Michigan set its primary for Jan. 15, ignoring national party officials, and last week Iowa Republicans announced they'll hold their caucuses on Thursday, Jan. 3. If Gardner were to designate Jan. 8, it would leave only five days between Iowa and New Hampshire, which Gardner may regard as insufficient time in the sun for New Hampshire.

So now there's a distinct possibility that New Hampshire will hold its 2008 primary in 2007 - on Tuesday, Dec. 11, to be precise. That date was chosen so as not to be too close to Christmas or, for that matter, so as not to be on Christmas itself, which falls on Tuesday this year.

Tradition clearly is on New Hampshire and Iowa's side. Politics can be played on a face-to-face, retail level in those states, where voters have come to expect the right to meet and question candidates face to face. But two small rural states hardly are typical of the American electorate. Their influence is far too great, but efforts by other states to reduce that influence have backfired.

As many as two dozen states, for example, including Missouri and Illinois, will hold presidential primaries on Feb. 5. But as the timing stands now, candidates who don't do well in Iowa and New Hampshire may run out of campaign money before Feb. 5, which is being called "Super Duper Tuesday."

We're reminded that 16 years ago, that proud son of Belleville and then- U.S. Sen. Alan J. Dixon, D-Ill., proposed a system of eight regional presidential primaries to be held from March through June each election year. His idea was to cut down on the influence of New Hampshire and Iowa. Dixon argued that by spreading out the election and giving candidates from all parts of the country a chance to show their strength, the system could be made more thoughtful, more thorough and fairer.

He was right, but his idea went nowhere. Neither did a similar proposal endorsed by the National Association of Secretaries of State in 2004. Now three U.S. senators - Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., Joseph Lieberman, I-Conn., and Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn. - have introduced a bill calling for four regional primaries, starting in 2012. Their proposal still would give Iowa and New Hampshire a head start, but afterward, states would rotate regional primaries from March through June. That's a much better system than the money-talks crapshoot now in place. The nation deserves it, and Congress should act on it.

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