

8. ARIZONA

In 1992 former Governor Bruce Babbitt of Arizona made what sounded like a silly proposal. "I have long advocated," Babbitt said, "that Arizona pass a law setting its presidential primary date the same day as New Hampshire's. Then when New Hampshire tries to set its primary seven days ahead of Arizona's, it will automatically reset Arizona's primary date to New Hampshire's. It would be fun to see how New Hampshire handles that one."¹

Babbitt's proposal was not as silly as it sounded. Shortly after he made his suggestion, the Arizona state legislature passed a law setting Arizona's 1996 presidential primary on the exact same day as the first presidential primary scheduled by any other state. When taken together with New Hampshire's famous law demanding that the Granite State always hold the earliest presidential primary, the new Arizona law put Arizona's primary square on the same day as New Hampshire's.

Prior to 1996 Arizona held caucuses in March and April that produced no identifiable winners on caucuses night. The result was that Arizona played no role whatsoever in the presidential nomination process. Presidential candidates and the news media tended to ignore the state completely.

The person who introduced the new presidential primary election law in the state legislature in Arizona was Republican state Senator Bev Hermon. She was up front about her reasons for pushing Arizona to have one of the first presidential primaries in the nation. It would give Arizonans an opportunity to see, hear, and talk with the presidential candidates before the nomination had already been decided in far off states such as Iowa and New Hampshire.

State Senator Hermon was well aware that New Hampshire would not give up sole ownership of the first presidential primary without a fight. "It's become a cottage industry for them," Hermon said. "This is not about a presidential election. It's about creating tourism in the middle of winter when the ground is frozen solid as a rock."

Arizona boosters cited the state's mild winter climate as the best argument for staging one of

the nation's first presidential primaries in the southwestern desert. Candidates and news reporters could enjoy working in warm sunshine rather than being freezing and wet in the cold and snow of New Hampshire. Better to be at pool side or on the golf course in Phoenix than shivering to death in Manchester or Portsmouth.

The anticipated brutal response from New Hampshire was soon forthcoming. "I don't know how dogged and determined Arizona is to be No. 1," said former New Hampshire pollster David Moore. "I do know New Hampshire is very dogged and determined to remain first."

Then New Hampshire Secretary of State Bill Gardner jumped into the fray. "The idea is to let the people have their way," Gardner stated. New Hampshire had an early primary long ago "when it wasn't popular, when party bosses chose the presidential candidates. I don't think our reaction is any different from how any other state would react."²

Suddenly the Republican Governor of Arizona and the Republican Governor of New Hampshire were verbally at each other's throats. "I'm tired of Arizona being ignored by the rest of the country," complained Arizona Governor J. Fife Symington. He then warned: "The West is rising!" Steve Merrill, the New Hampshire chief executive, answered right back. He accused Arizona of launching "a clear attack on the people of New Hampshire and the tradition of the political primary system in this nation."

The two states were at loggerheads until January of 1995, when the 1996 presidential primary season was just one year away. Arizona's Fife Symington relented and scheduled that state's primary one week after New Hampshire's, as the New Hampshire law required. "We will not be the aggressors," Governor Symington said as he permitted New Hampshire to maintain its vaunted "First In The Nation" position.³

Even though it gave up first place to New Hampshire, Arizona had an exciting Republican presidential primary in 1996. All three major candidates - Kansas Senator Bob Dole, conservative political columnist Patrick Buchanan, and business publishing millionaire Steve Forbes -

campaigns hard in Arizona. The state's television and radio stations were flooded with political advertisements.

Pat Buchanan was running on a platform of strong opposition to gun control legislation. In one of the great presidential primary photographic opportunities of all time, Buchanan dressed in cowboy garb, strapped on a holster with a six-shooter pistol, and stood menacingly before the cameras in Tombstone, Arizona. That town was the site of the infamous cowboy gunfight at the O.K. Corral.

When the desert sand cleared, Arizona produced a surprise winner in 1996. Steve Forbes narrowly won the primary, with Kansan Bob Dole a close second. Pat Buchanan was in third place, but so close behind Dole that, on election night, a number of television networks predicted that Buchanan would come in second.

Arizona in 1996 completely muddied the waters of that year's race for the GOP nomination. It reinvigorated the Forbes campaign and seemed to signal that Robert Dole's campaign was in trouble. It took Bob Dole two more weeks of hard campaigning and a string of decisive primary victories to finally nail down the nomination.

The really bad news in Arizona in 1996 was for Patrick Buchanan. Having won the New Hampshire primary, Buchanan believed that a second win in Arizona could have made him the 1996 GOP nominee. His third place finish, although close, doomed his future chances. "If we'd gotten that victory in Arizona yesterday - bye-bye," Buchanan told reporters. "There would have been no looking back."⁴

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The year 2000 Republican presidential primary in Arizona should have been a slam dunk for hometown politician John McCain. It is traditional that "favorite son" candidates always win their home state primary, customarily by 20 percentage points or more. Most presidential candidates do not even bother to campaign on an opponent's home turf. They invest their limited money and time

in some other state where the playing field is more level.

But that is not what happened in Arizona in 2000. Pursuing his vaunted 50-state strategy, George W. Bush campaigned hard in Arizona early on. The Texas Governor established telephone banks in the state and began mass-mailing letters and brochures to Arizona Republicans. As primary election day neared, the Bush organization, well-financed and with plenty of money spend, started running a heavy dose of TV commercials in the state.

Another surprising development was the decision by Arizona's Republican Governor, Jane Dee Hull, to back Texan Bush rather than hometown boy McCain. The Governor's son, Mike Hull, signed on as Bush's Arizona campaign manager. He told the press: "We see opportunity, and we're working this state like crazy.... All George W. has to do is make a real contest of it. And he's already doing that, no small achievement in the other guy's home state."

Another advantage for Bush was that only registered Republicans could vote in Arizona's presidential primary. That meant that McCain could not count on independent voters to buoy his candidacy the way they did in New Hampshire.

And John McCain had image problems on his home ground. According to an Arizona State University pollster, 70 percent of Arizonans approved of McCain but a significant number saw him as "too much of a maverick and outsider, too outspoken, too combative."⁵ Translation: Arizona voters loved John McCain as their U.S. Senator but were not too certain they wanted him for President.

A prominent state newspaper, the *Arizona Republic*, editorialized on some the state's mixed feelings about John McCain. "McCain's approach to politics doesn't fit the need or temperament of the times," the editorial said. "McCain too frequently is dismissive of those who disagree with him.... McCain's political style is not that of persuasion; too often, it's the politics of brow-beating, confrontation and intimidation."⁶

The end result of all this controversy was that, in the months leading up to Arizona's

Republican primary on February 22, 2000, John McCain was leading George W. Bush in Arizona by only about six percentage points. At one time one poll had Bush ahead of McCain. Unbelievably, John McCain was running scared in his home state.

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And then an amazing thing happened. As John McCain's campaign for the presidency began to take off nationally, his polling numbers over George W. Bush in Arizona began to improve. The real turning point was McCain's landslide victory in the New Hampshire primary. Apparently the strong support New Hampshireites gave McCain convinced Arizonans that their home state man was worthy of their support. As primary election day neared, McCain was 20 points or more ahead of Bush in Arizona polls.⁷

There was irony in these developments. Apparently the "exaggeration" of the New Hampshire primary extends even to the voters in the home states of the various presidential candidates. Arizona Republicans did not decide they really liked their home state candidate until voters in "First In The Nation" New Hampshire, a state more than two thousand miles away, gave John McCain a big thumbs up.

On election night, John McCain won by the predicted 20 point margin. George W. Bush showed strength only among Arizona's most conservative Republicans.⁸ That result suggested that Bush's sharp turn to the right in South Carolina had an appealing impact on conservative voters in Arizona. It also suggested that a major effect of McCain's challenge to Bush for the year 2000 Republican nomination was to give Bush a highly conservative image nationally.

The impact of the Arizona results was mitigated by *compression*, the scheduling of one state's primary close to another's. The Arizona primary on February 22 was only three days after the South Carolina primary on February 19. The reporters and political commentators were still enthralled with George W. Bush's big victory in South Carolina. They therefore gave scant attention to John McCain rescuing himself in his home state of Arizona.

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 8:

1. Recollection of the author.
2. Associated Press, "Arizona, New Hampshire In Primary Battle," *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph*, December 11, 1994, p. B7.
3. "Political Notes; New Hampshire And Arizona Call A Truce," *International Herald Tribune*, January 31, 1995, p. 3.
4. Lloyd Grove, "Populist Pat Shakes Hands While Potomac Pat Shakes His Rivals," *Washington Post*, March 1, 1996, p. D1.
5. B. Drummond Ayres, Jr., "Assured Elsewhere, McCain Worries In Arizona," *New York Times*, February 7, 2000.
6. Todd S. Purdum, "Bush's Goal: Cut The Edge McCain Has As Native Son," *New York Times*, February 22, 2000.
7. John B. Judis, "Favorite Son?" *New Republic*, February 28, 2000, pp. 24-25.
8. Todd S. Purdum, "McCain Keeps Firm Grip On Home State," *New York Times*, February 23, 2000, p. A15.