

### 3. THE FEBRUARY FOLLIES: FRONT-LOADING, EARLY CLOSURE, COMPRESSION, AND MEGA-TUESDAYS

The United States has developed a totally unique system for nominating major party candidates for President of the United States. Special elections, called presidential primaries, have all the candidates in one political party run against each other in a specific state for that state party's nomination support. The presidential primary commits that state's delegation to the party national convention, usually held in the summer, to cast most or all of its votes for the candidate who won the state's presidential primary.

A variant of the presidential primary is for a state to hold presidential caucuses. Instead of voting at a polling place, party members gather at a neighborhood meeting called a caucus. The meeting is called to order, speeches are given on behalf of the various political party candidates for president, and then a vote is taken of the party members attending the caucus. The voting results from each caucus are then gathered together for the entire state and used to determine how the state's delegates to the party national convention will vote.

For most of the 20th Century, the presidential nominating process in the United States was a very leisurely process. The presidential primaries and caucuses began in February in New Hampshire. The nominating calendar then coasted through March and April with just a few states, such as Wisconsin, participating. The schedule wound up in May and June with Oregon and California having the final say.

But in the 1990s, the **Four Horsemen of the Presidential Primary Apocalypse** began to do their devastating work. These four trends changed running for President of the United States from a meandering walk spread over five months to a breathless sprint lasting just five or so weeks.

Horseman #1: **Front-Loading.** By the early 1990s, individual states started to figure out that selecting an early primary date made that particular state much more important in the presidential primary process. Presidential candidates who won early nominating contests, such as the Iowa caucuses or the New Hampshire primary, quickly built *momentum*, or the *Big Mo*. The news media played up the importance of those candidates who won early primaries and caucuses. At the same time, the news media tended to write off the candidates who lost those early contests as hopeless losers. If a state really wanted to play a big role in choosing the presidential nominees, selecting an early primary or caucuses date was imperative.

Thus, by the year 2000, a sizeable number of states had moved their presidential primaries and caucuses up to late February and early March. This piling up of early-scheduled nominating events became known in the press as *front-loading*.

Horseman #2: **Early Closure.** Once a significant number of states were holding early presidential primaries and caucuses, the winners of the Democratic and Republican nominations for President were being quickly determined. This was mainly a function of the desire of the news media to declare an early winner. If a candidate won just five or six early primaries and caucuses in a row, the press would declare that candidate the de facto winner of the party presidential nomination. It did not matter that many states had not yet held their presidential primaries or caucuses.

This phenomenon of the news media declaring the race over after just a few early primaries and caucuses can best be described as *early closure*.

Horseman #3: **Compression.** As more and more states tried to schedule their presidential primaries earlier in the nominating process, the time between one presidential primary and another

was greatly reduced. In the relatively recent past - the 1970s and 1980s - there had often been two or three weeks between one presidential primary and another. But by the year 2000, some presidential primaries were scheduled less than three days apart.

This effect, labeled *compression*, gave voters in a particular state very little time in which to react and respond to the results of a previous presidential primary or caucuses. It also was hard on the candidates for President. After surviving one presidential primary or caucuses, a candidate would have to try to win a subsequent primary or caucuses scheduled just a few days later. The inevitable result was presidential candidates who raced from primary state to primary state, campaigning at a fever pitch and quickly exhausting themselves.

Horseman #4: **Mega-Tuesdays**. In the rush to get to the front of the pack and hold an early presidential primary or caucuses, a number of states began scheduling presidential primaries on the same calendar day. At first only three or four states were holding primaries on the same Tuesday. By the year 2000, however, there was one instance where more than ten states were voting on the same day. Since most presidential primaries are scheduled for a Tuesday, these blockbuster election days with large numbers of states voting are called *mega-Tuesdays*.

By the late 1990s, political reporters and commentators were well aware of the way *front-loading*, *early closure*, *compression*, and *mega-Tuesdays* were effecting the nominating process. The magazine *Economist* noted: "The vital primaries now come so thick and fast that there is no chance to pause or regroup between them."<sup>1</sup> The *New York Times* concluded that the primary and caucuses calendar had become "a case study in democracy gone awry."<sup>2</sup> The *Washington Post* complained the emerging schedule had produced "the most absurdly foreshortened primary process the nation has ever seen."<sup>3</sup>

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For the year 2000 presidential nominating process, the primary calendar became even more *front-loaded*. The states of New York and California, the two most populous states in the nation, moved their respective presidential primaries to the first Tuesday in March. The two states picked that day because it was the earliest date permitted to them by *national Democratic Party rules*.

That date, the first Tuesday in March, was already crowded with presidential primaries. All of the New England states except New Hampshire were scheduled to vote on that day. Other states that traditionally voted on the first Tuesday in March were Georgia and Maryland. Then, to make that day even more of an electoral three-ring circus, Missouri and Ohio picked that date for their presidential primaries.<sup>4</sup>

Political reporters were quick to observe that the first Tuesday in March was turning into the most significant day of the presidential nominating process. When New York and California scheduled presidential primaries on the same day, the *New York Times* portrayed the first Tuesday in March of 2000 as "a giant national primary on a single day." The *Times* wrote a sub-headline that used the words "Giant Bicoastal Primary" to describe this most *mega* of *mega-Tuesdays*. The *Times* went on to hint that the nominating season in 2000 would be only about four weeks long, from the New Hampshire primary in early February to the New York-California *et. al.* primary on the first Tuesday in March.<sup>5</sup>

The news reporters and commentators never agreed upon a single adjective with which to describe this new Goliath of a presidential primary day. The press and pundits never settled on a catchy phrase such as "Blockbuster Tuesday" or "Blowout Tuesday." But the *Wall Street Journal* early on referred to the first Tuesday in March as "Titanic Tuesday," and that label was subsequently

applied by William Safire in the *New York Times* and a headline writer for *U.S. News & World Report*.<sup>6</sup> But most of the time, this ultimate *mega-Tuesday* was simply referred to as the day of the New York and California presidential primaries.

New York and California completely altered the presidential primary calendar for 2000. But these actions by the nation's two most populous states had very different effects on the two major political parties - the Republicans and the Democrats. What the Republicans did with their primary calendar had a major effect on what happened to the Democrats in the year 2000 primaries. Therefore, the Republican calendar will be considered first.

### **The 2000 Republican Presidential Primary Calendar**

It was an event that went almost completely unnoticed. The setting was the 1996 Republican National Convention, held in San Diego, California, in mid-August. During the party housekeeping portion of the Convention, the delegates voted in a new national party rule concerning presidential primaries. Among other things, the new rule in effect said that no state could hold its Republican primary earlier than the first Tuesday in February.

That new rule seemed innocuous enough on its face. But the state of New Hampshire was quite anxious to preserve its "First In The Nation" status of always holding the first presidential primary. To make certain that no other state would get ahead of it on the Republican primary calendar, New Hampshire promptly moved its presidential primary to the first Tuesday in February.

Not to be outdone, the state of Iowa moved its presidential caucuses, traditionally held on a Monday, to the last week in January, eight days ahead of New Hampshire. Iowa did not have to follow the national Republican Party rule about presidential primaries only being held on or after the first Tuesday in February. That was because Iowa was holding presidential *caucuses* rather than a

presidential primary.

Under ordinary circumstances, when scheduling presidential primaries or caucuses, most states automatically schedule the Democratic Party primary or caucuses the same day as the Republican Party primary or caucuses. The main reason for doing this is to cut costs. Both Democratic and Republican voters can use the same polling place and the same election judges and registrars, thereby saving taxpayer dollars.

It is important at this point to recall the national Democratic Party rule, mentioned previously, that no presidential primary or caucuses can be held prior to the first Tuesday in March. The national Democratic Party allows only two exceptions to that rule. The states of Iowa and New Hampshire, because they traditionally have held the first presidential caucuses and the first presidential primary, are allowed to go prior to the first Tuesday in March. This exception allowed New Hampshire to set both its Democratic and Republican primaries on the first Tuesday in February, the earliest date permitted by Republican rules. This exception also allowed Iowa to schedule its caucuses, for both parties, in late January.

Pay close attention! This is where it gets interesting. In the year 2000, the national Democratic Party rule allowed only Iowa and New Hampshire to hold a presidential primary or caucuses prior to the first Tuesday in March. All other states had to schedule their Democratic primaries or caucuses on the first Tuesday in March or later. The Republican rule, however, allowed any state to hold a primary or caucuses in February provided it was on or after the first Tuesday in February.

Canny Republican politicians in a number of states looked at these two national party rules, one Democratic and one Republican, and began to notice something. If a state separated its

Republican presidential primary from the Democratic one, the Republican primary could be scheduled during the four-week period between the New Hampshire primary and that gigantic New York-California primary on the first Tuesday in March.

Republican leaders in a number of Republican states decided to do exactly that. These states separated the GOP primary from the Democratic primary and slipped the state's Republican presidential primary on to the calendar prior to the New York-California *mega-Tuesday*. That was, after all, the *mega-Tuesday* on which most observers were predicting the 2000 primary season would be over and the presidential nominees of the two major parties decided.

The first state to get in line right after the New Hampshire primary (Tuesday, February 1, 2000) was Delaware. Called "The First State" because it was the first state to ratify the U.S. Constitution, Delaware scheduled its primary on February 8, 2000, exactly one week after New Hampshire.

Next in line was South Carolina, which moved its Republican presidential primary from the first Saturday in March to Saturday, February 19, 2000. Then Arizona and Michigan scheduled their GOP primaries on Tuesday, February 22, 2000, just three days after South Carolina. And one week after that, on Tuesday, February 29, 2000, Virginia and Washington state put their Republican contests on the Republican primary calendar.

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## **REPUBLICAN PRIMARY SCHEDULE - JANUARY 24 TO MARCH 7, 2000**

January 24	Iowa caucuses
February 1	New Hampshire
February 8	Delaware
February 19	South Carolina
February 22	Arizona, Michigan
February 29	Virginia, Washington, North Dakota caucuses
March 7	California, Connecticut, Georgia, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, New York, Ohio, Rhode Island, Vermont

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When the dust had cleared, six states had scheduled Republican presidential primaries between the New Hampshire primary on February 1, 2000, and the New York-California primary on March 7, 2000. That meant that the Republican primary calendar in the month of February 2000 was going to be lively and crowded. It also meant that, before New York and California voted on the first Tuesday in March, a number of states with medium-sized populations were going to hold GOP primaries and weed out a number of the weaker candidates.

### **The 2000 Democratic Presidential Primary Calendar**

But the situation in the Democratic Party was going to be completely different. There was that famous national Democratic Party rule - no state may hold a presidential primary prior to the first Tuesday in March, the only exceptions being New Hampshire and the Iowa caucuses. The



effect of that rule was that, for the Democrats, the Iowa caucuses would occur in late January and the New Hampshire primary on February 1, 2000.

But then there would be nothing at all for the Democrats for five weeks until the New York-California *et.al.* blockbuster primary day on Tuesday, March 7, 2000. The Democrats were scheduling plenty of action around February 1, followed by five long weeks of nothing, followed by the New York-California *mega-Tuesday* that would surely determine the Democratic nominee.

And, a number of sharp-eyed political analysts noted, that five weeks during which the Democrats had no primaries or caucuses scheduled was going to be a dangerous time for the Democratic Party. The Republicans had scheduled six Republicans-only presidential primaries during that time. That meant that, for five of the most critical weeks of the presidential nominating season, the Republicans would have the presidential primary stage all to themselves. No one would be paying any attention at all to the Democrats because no Democratic primaries or caucuses were scheduled.

In short, the Republicans would be generating tons of presidential primary news and electoral excitement. The Democrats would be generating none.

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## DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY SCHEDULE - JANUARY 24 TO MARCH 7, 2000

January 24                      Iowa caucuses

February 1                     New Hampshire

\*\*\* five weeks with no Democratic primaries or caucuses that select national convention delegates

March 7                        California, Connecticut, Georgia, Maine,  
Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, New York,  
Ohio, Rhode Island, Vermont

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So, as the year 2000 presidential nominating season got under way, three things were evident to the political cognoscenti who pay close attention to such an arcane thing as the presidential primary and caucuses calendar:

1. The presidential nominations of both political parties would most likely be determined by the *mega-Tuesday* of March 7, 2000, when California and New York and nine additional states held presidential primaries. The candidate who won most or all of the party's primaries on that day would surely be the party nominee for President.

2. For the first time in presidential primary history, a significant number of states would be holding Republican presidential primaries separate from Democratic presidential primaries. These six Republican primaries were all scheduled for middle and late February when the Democratic Party had no primaries scheduled.

3. The Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary, because of their position in a national

Democratic Party rule, would once again be scheduled in the coveted first and second positions on the presidential nominating calendar. This would make winning in Iowa and New Hampshire even more critical than usual for winning the presidential nomination race in both political parties.

Just about all the action for nominating the Republican and Democratic candidates for President in the year 2000 was going to take place in one month - the month of February. Due to the accentuated effects of *front-loading* and *compression*, the year 2000 nominating process, for both parties, could well be titled the *February Follies*.

#### ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 3:

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1. "America's Primaries: Fresh light on primary colors," *Economist*, February 24, 1996, pp. 23-25.

2. Richard L. Berke, "Early Contests Put Campaigns On Shaky Turf," *New York Times*, January 28, 1996, p. 1. In this article, Berke quoted the author on the prospects for reform of the presidential primary calendar: "About the only good thing I can say about what's happening this year is that maybe it's going to be bad enough that...the two national parties will get together and bring some order out of it."

3. David Broder, "Primaries are coming faster than bullets this year," *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph*, March 5, 1996, p. B5.

4. The state of Colorado, which held a presidential primary on the first Tuesday in March in both 1992 and 1996, moved its year 2000 presidential primary to a later date, Friday, March 10, 2000. This was a rare instance of *back-loading* rather than *front-loading*.

5. Todd S. Purdom, "California Joining Early-Bird States For Campaign 2000; Giant Bicoastal Primary; West Seeks More Say In Ever Shorter Nominating Process For President," *New York Times*, September 29, 1998, p. A1.

6. David Rogers, Greg Hitt, and Dennis Farney, "McCain Seeks To Rally Michigan After Weekend Loss," *Wall Street Journal*, February 22, 2000, p. A42. William Safire, "Toward 'Titanic Tuesday,'" *New York Times*, March 2, 2000. Roger Simon, "When Super Turns Titanic," *U.S. News & World Report*, March 6, 2000, p. 16.