

13. THE IRRELEVANT PRIMARIES

Titanic Tuesday ended the race for both the Democratic and Republican nominations for President in the year 2000. It was clear to all that it was going to be Albert Gore, Jr., for the Democrats and George W. Bush for the Republicans. But Titanic Tuesday did not end the voting. More than 25 states and the District of Columbia had presidential primaries or caucuses scheduled over a three month period following Titanic Tuesday.

What could be more pointless than going to the polls to vote in an election where the winner has already been decided? But Democrats and Republicans across the United States were called upon to do just that. And a number of the more populous states in the nation were holding these *irrelevant* primaries and caucuses. Some were really Abig@ states, such as Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Texas.

The news media, of course, did not bother to cover any of these meaningless primaries and caucuses. Occasionally the voting results were reported in a paragraph or two buried in the inside pages of a newspaper. The political reporters and pundits immediately turned their attention to the upcoming general election race between Al Gore and George W. Bush. The voting in that election campaign would not take place until a full eight months after Titanic Tuesday, in early November of 2000.

THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN PRIMARY

It seemed like a great idea at first. Mike Leavitt, the Republican Governor of Utah, proposed that the eight states comprising the Rocky Mountain West come together and schedule their presidential primaries and caucuses on the same day. By all voting at the same time, Governor Leavitt argued, the Rocky Mountain states would attract campaigning candidates and their news

media camp followers.¹

In geographical terms, the Rocky Mountain primary would have been one of the biggest in the land. The eight states of Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming comprise approximately one-fourth of the total land area of the contiguous 48 states. Although much of that land is thinly populated, there are significant numbers of voters in such major metropolitan areas as Phoenix, Arizona; Denver, Colorado; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Las Vegas, Nevada; and Salt Lake City, Utah.

But the Rocky Mountain primary was doomed from the start. Six of the eight states declined to join Utah in the endeavor. Only Colorado signed on to the effort to give the Rocky Mountain region some major influence in the presidential nomination process. And then the two states of Utah and Colorado had difficulty finding a date on which to vote.

Democratic Party rules established March 7, 2000, as the earliest date on which Utah and Colorado could hold simultaneous Democratic and Republican presidential primaries. But that date had already been chosen by the heavyweight states of New York and California, and no one would pay attention to a Rocky Mountain primary being held the same day those two populous states were voting. In desperation, Utah and Colorado scheduled the first Rocky Mountain primary on Friday, March 10, 2000, just three days after Titanic Tuesday on March 7.

Actually, what Utah and Colorado were doing was gambling on the idea that the Titanic Tuesday states would split their support among the various presidential candidates and thus make Rocky Mountain Friday important. What if Bush had won Ohio but McCain prevailed in California? Suppose Bill Bradley triumphed in New York while Al Gore was sweeping Georgia? Titanic Tuesday would not have automatically determined the eventual winners. Then there would

have been a lively three-day run-up to the Utah and Colorado primaries, with rapid fire candidate visits to the two states and news reporters descending in droves.

The voting results in Utah and Colorado might have gone a long way toward determining the eventual winners in both the Democratic and Republican races.

It did not turn out that way. Utah and Colorado missed gaining national significance by just three days. When Al Gore and George W. Bush both dominated in their Titanic Tuesday primaries, Utah and Colorado were instantly reduced to irrelevance in the year 2000 presidential nomination process. There were a lot of bad jokes about it being the ARocky Molehill Primary@ rather than the Rocky Mountain Primary.² The *Denver Post* headlined it as the AWhy Bother@ primary and the ADidn=t Matter@ primary.³

Utah and Colorado learned a valuable lesson in the year 2000. If a state wants to be certain of holding a relevant presidential primary, that state should schedule its primary on the first day permitted by national party rules - even if more populous states are voting on the same day.

SOUTHERN SUPER TUESDAY

Another victim of the early closure of the 2000 presidential nomination races was the old Southern Super Tuesday. Created in 1988, the original ASuper Tuesday@ was designed to give the South a major role, if not the major role, in choosing the Democratic and Republican party nominees. And it worked that way at the beginning. Super Tuesday was scheduled on the *second* Tuesday in March, at that time the earliest date permitted by Democratic Party rules. And virtually every Southern state cooperated by scheduling its presidential primary or caucuses on that one day.

But, when the national Democratic Party opened up the *first* Tuesday in March for presidential primaries, the Southern states still scheduled to vote on the *second* Tuesday in March

suddenly found themselves a week too late in the year 2000. Thus Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas all held irrelevant primaries on March 14, 2000, simply because the race in both parties had been decided one week earlier on March 7, 2000, on Titanic Tuesday.

One Southern politician was irate that six such important states were not going to participate in a meaningful way in the year 2000 presidential nomination campaigns. I call it Stupid Tuesday, grumbled Mike Francis, Republican Party Chair in Louisiana, about the year 2000 Southern Super Tuesday. The taxpayers of Louisiana are going to spend \$4 million so that maybe 40,000 people can show up to a meaningless primary. Isn't that ridiculous?

The message of Southern Super Tuesday in 2000 was this. States that wish to hold *relevant* presidential primaries and caucuses cannot just adopt a particular primary day, such as the second Tuesday in March, and leave the date unchanged over the years. The presidential nominating process is different every four years. Change in the system is constant and unrelenting. States can keep their presidential primaries *relevant* only by rescheduling those primaries every four years to the earliest date permitted by national party rules.

WISCONSIN AND OREGON

No discussion of irrelevant primaries is complete without Wisconsin and Oregon. Back in the 1960s and 1970s, Wisconsin and Oregon held two of the most important and well-publicized presidential primaries. Sadly, by the year 2000, both states had fallen to the back of the pack in terms of the primary calendar. Two states that once were very relevant to the nominating process had, by the year 2000, become totally irrelevant.

For many years Wisconsin held its presidential primary in early April, about a month after the New Hampshire primary. With very few intervening primaries or caucuses, Wisconsin became a

really important stop on the presidential nomination trail. In 1960 U.S. Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts defeated U.S. Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota in the Democratic Party portion of the Wisconsin primary. It was a victory that built important momentum for Kennedy in his successful drive for the 1960 Democratic nomination that eventually carried him into the White House.

Another big winner in the Wisconsin primary was George McGovern in 1972. A U.S. Senator from South Dakota, McGovern was running for the Democratic nomination on a platform of opposition to U.S. participation in the war in Vietnam. A surprise victory in Wisconsin helped to carry McGovern to the 1972 Democratic nomination, but he lost the general election to incumbent Republican President Richard Nixon.

Wisconsin failed to move its primary date forward when front-loading gripped the presidential nominating process in the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, in the year 2000, Wisconsin voted on April 4, a full four weeks after all the excitement was over on Titanic Tuesday.

Even sadder than Wisconsin was the case of Oregon, which in 1910 was the first state in the United States to let its citizens vote in a presidential primary with the actual names of the presidential candidates printed on the ballot. The Oregon primary in the 1960s and 1970s was scheduled in May, close to the end of the primary calendar. Oregon's presidential primary gained in importance because it was held just prior to the California primary, which at that time was held on the first Tuesday in June. Presidential candidates could gain important momentum coming into the crucial California primary by winning in Oregon.

Some significant events in American political history took place during the Oregon presidential primary. Back in 1948 Thomas E. Dewey and Harold Stassen, both running for the

Republican Party nomination, staged the first nationwide radio debate between presidential candidates just prior to the Oregon primary. Twenty years later, in 1968, Robert F. Kennedy was defeated in Oregon by Eugene McCarthy. It was the first time a member of the Kennedy family had lost an election in 25 years.

In total defiance of rationality, the state of Oregon held its year 2000 presidential primary on May 16, more than two months after the race had been decided on Titanic Tuesday in early March. Oregon=s primary came so late in the game that John McCain=s name was no longer listed on the Republican ballot. In the same way, Bill Bradley=s name was missing from the Democratic ballot.

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Why do so many governors and state legislatures appear to not care whether their state's voters participate significantly in the presidential primary process? In more than 25 states in the year 2000 presidential election, political leaders made no visible effort to give their constituents a meaningful role to play in choosing the Democratic and Republican nominees for President. Perhaps all those governors and state legislators did not know they had the power to schedule a meaningful primary or caucuses for their state. That probably happened in a number of states. But in most cases the governor and the legislators simply did not consider participation by their constituents in the presidential nominating process to be very important.⁵

Endnotes - Chapter 13:

1. For a full discussion of the creation of the Rocky Mountain Primary, see Andrew E. Busch, *The Rise And Fall Of The Rocky Mountain Regional Primary*, @ paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association, San Jose, California, March 24-26, 2000.

2. Peter Blake, A Rocky Mountain Regional Primary Drive Falls Short, @ *Denver Rocky Mountain News*, April 11, 1999, p. 3B.

3. Fred Brown, A In >Why Bother= Primary, Bush, Gore Win Easily, @ *Denver Post*, March 11, 2000, p. 1A. Ed Quillen, A Suppose The West Gave A Primary And It Didn=t Matter, @ *Denver Post*, March 7, 2000, p. 11B.

4. David Firestone, A With A Yawn, Six States Await >Stupid Tuesday, = @ *New York Times*, March 13, 2000.

5. Susan Greene, A Fizzled Contest Highlights Frustration Over State=s Bit Role, @ *Denver Post*, March 11, 2000, p. 7A.