

9. MICHIGAN

In 1996 Michigan was one of four states in the Midwest that had their timing all wrong. Michigan joined with three other important midwestern states - Illinois, Ohio, and Wisconsin - in scheduling their presidential primaries on the same Tuesday. The problem was the four states picked a date that was too late in the presidential primary calendar.

It seemed like a good idea at the time. This new presidential primary was to be called Midwest Tuesday. Three of the states - Illinois, Michigan, and Ohio - were among the ten most populous states in the United States. Furthermore, all four states were evenly divided between the Democratic and Republican parties and represented an accurate cross-section of the American electorate.

And the Midwest was one of the most important and clearly-identifiable sections of the country. It deserved a big say in the presidential nominating process.

But the date selected for the 1996 Midwest Tuesday was the third Tuesday in March. Two weeks earlier, on the first Tuesday in March, Kansas Senator Robert Dole won a string of primaries in New England, the South, and the Rocky Mountain West and sewed up the 1996 Republican nomination for President. Midwest Tuesday turned into one of those ho-hum elections where the voters tramped to the polls and dutifully cast their ballots - and the voting results had no effect whatsoever on who was nominated to office.

For the year 2000, Michigan Governor John Engler successfully supported separating the Republican primary from the Democratic and moving the Republican voting into the middle of February. That way Michigan Republicans would be voting prior to the first Tuesday in March, when California and New York and fourteen other states would all be voting on the same day. Michigan Democrats were left with caucuses scheduled for mid-March, long after California and New York had voted and the race probably would have been decided.

Governor Engler, a Republican, did not just press to change the date of the 2000 Michigan

Republican presidential primary. He also supported changing the state's voter registration laws so that independent voters and Democrats could vote in the Republican primary. Engler argued that giving Democrats the opportunity to vote in a Republican presidential primary would weaken the psychological ties of those Democrats to the Democratic Party. Engler also believed that having Democrats voting for Republican presidential candidates in a primary would help win Democratic crossover votes for the Republican candidate in the general election in November.

So Michigan's Republican primary in 2000 was a much bigger deal than in 1996. But not a really big deal. The problem was *compression*. Similar to Arizona, the Michigan GOP primary was scheduled for February 22, just three days after the South Carolina primary on February 19. Early on, Michiganders did not see a great deal of George W. Bush and John McCain campaigning in their state because both candidates considered South Carolina the more important fight.

Which reveals the extent to which presidential primaries are based more on symbolism than reality. Up to that point in the year 2000 nominating process, Michigan was the most populous state to hold a Republican primary. In fact, the Michigan Republican primary had more convention delegates at stake than New Hampshire and South Carolina combined. But because South Carolina was voting first (by three days), and South Carolina had a reputation for holding a key GOP primary, South Carolina took precedence over Michigan in the minds of the candidates and the news media.

The *New York Times* labeled the Michigan primary "secondhand." The *Detroit News* grumbled sarcastically to its readers: "Don't expect to shake the hand of a candidate any time soon." But most Michiganders were not upset. Bill Ballenger, editor of *Inside Michigan Politics*, pointed out that, previously, the Michigan primary had been a "non-entity." He added: "The candidates were never here very much before this year, compared to how often they've been here this time, which still isn't very much."¹

It was true that the three-day gap between the South Carolina and Michigan primaries was reducing the time the candidates could spend in Michigan. But another factor was at work as well.

New Hampshire is a small state in terms of population, so presidential campaigning there can be intensely personal. There is a great deal of what is called "retail" politics, where presidential candidates sometimes go from door-to-door meeting people, stand around shaking hands in shopping centers, and do small and intimate "town hall" meetings.

The rules change when dealing with a state as populous and geographically big as Michigan. In terms of land area, Michigan is one of the largest states east of the Mississippi River. To drive to one part of the state, the remote Upper Peninsula, a ferry boat must be taken across one of the Great Lakes. In such an environment, candidates turn to what is known as "wholesale" politics. The emphasis shifts from person-to-person campaigning to big buys of radio and television advertising. Folksy town halls are replaced by "big city" media events where candidates address thousands of cheering supporters packing a convention hall or sports palace.

In really big states such as Michigan, candidates have to reach out to hundreds of thousands and sometimes even millions of voters. A kitchen-table conversation with one homemaker will not work in the Michigan environment the way it does in New Hampshire.

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Sunday, February 13, 2000, was a big day on network television in the Republican presidential primary battle raging at that time. Over on "Meet The Press" on NBC, George W. Bush charged that Democrats were mobilizing to support John McCain in states such as Michigan, where the Republican primary was open to Democrats. "The only thing I'm concerned about," Bush said, "is that Democrats flock into the Republican primary to decide who the Republican nominee is, and then head back for the Democrats in the general election."

Bush in essence was charging that Democrats were going to vote for John McCain in the Michigan Republican primary because they considered McCain the easier of the two candidates to beat in the general election in November. Some Bush supporters even argued that supporters of Democratic presidential hopeful Al Gore were urging Democrats in Michigan to vote for McCain,

just to make things as difficult as possible for George W. Bush, the most likely Republican nominee.

Meanwhile, over at "Face The Nation" on CBS, John McCain was answering right back to George W. Bush. "I'm very proud that Libertarians or vegetarians or anybody would consider supporting me," McCain fumed into the television cameras. "I have a vision of reform for America that I think is taking hold... all over the country."²

The McCain camp appeared to realize that it had a ready source of votes in Michigan Democrats. Registered Democrats in Michigan received a mailing from McCain urging them to "make your voice heard by voting for the one candidate committed to reform." The mailing went on to note that Michigan Democrats would not lose the right to vote in Michigan's Democratic caucuses by voting for McCain in the Republican primary. "Even if you vote Tuesday...", the mailing read, "you can still participate in future Democratic Party political activity."

The McCain forces also acknowledged sending prerecorded telephone calls for McCain to Democratic and Republican voters alike.³

Should Democrats be allowed to vote in Republican presidential primaries? That question quickly came to the fore in the Bush-McCain struggle in Michigan. The Bush campaign argued that Republicans in Michigan were voting solidly for Bush and that McCain was mainly receiving support from independents and Democrats. The Bush forces were implying that John McCain might even win the year 2000 Republican nomination despite the fact that George W. Bush was the choice of the vast majority of "party line" Republicans.

But there is no concise answer to the question of whether Democrats should or should not vote in Republican primaries, or vice versa. That decision is left to each individual state to decide when it passes its election laws setting up a presidential primary. But one thing was quickly becoming clear in Michigan in 2000. Republican Governor John Engler made a big mistake, at least from the point of view of the Bush campaign, when he opened the Michigan Republican presidential primary to Democratic voter participation.

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As soon as the South Carolina Republican primary was over and George W. Bush's victory had been flashed across the nation by the news media, both Bush and John McCain headed for Michigan. The effects of compression were obvious. Each candidate began a three-day marathon to win as many Michigan votes as possible. A state that had been neglected by both campaigns for weeks and weeks suddenly became the center of all campaign activity.

An argument began to rage among political sophisticates about how the compression between South Carolina's and Michigan's voting dates would effect the impact of Bush's big victory in South Carolina on Michigan. The traditional wisdom was that Bush's win in South Carolina would easily enable him to triumph in Michigan. After all, the biggest effect on the next presidential primary is supposed to be the results of the previous presidential primary.

But there was an opposing viewpoint. It held that three days was not enough time for the effect of Bush's South Carolina win to soak in on the average Michigan voter. Part of the lift that comes from winning an early presidential primary is the sustained favorable comment that is forthcoming from the news media. But getting your photograph on the cover of *Time* is a process that takes time, usually longer than three short days. The same is true of having all the newspaper columnists begin to speculate that the most recent primary winner will surely take the party nomination for President. Compression, in effect, reduces the impact of a previous primary victory because there is insufficient time for the news media to exaggerate the results in behalf of the primary winner.

But the two candidates responded to the South Carolina results as if they were important. George W. Bush campaigned in Michigan with the air of a man who had the nomination all wrapped up. He reduced his attacks on John McCain and returned to focusing his attacks on President Clinton and Vice President Al Gore. Speaking at a rally in Southfield, Michigan, Bush shouted to the crowd: "Listen to me now. There are 260 days more to no more Clinton-Gore!"

When the subject of John McCain did come up, the Bush camp tended to discuss McCain's fraternizing with Democrats so McCain could win the Michigan primary. George W. Bush described one of McCain's supporters in Michigan as "the most liberal of liberal Democrats." Speaking in support of Bush on "Face The Nation" on CBS, Michigan Governor John Engler griped: "McCain has absolutely courted some of... the worst people. They're our sworn foes. He has tried to bring some of them in to influence the result."⁴

The response of the McCain campaign to George W. Bush's victory in South Carolina was to launch an all-out attack on Bush and his purported credentials as "A Reformer With Results." John McCain had to win Michigan if he was going to reignite the enthusiasm for his candidacy generated by his big win in New Hampshire, his only win so far. Political reporters began to question how much longer McCain could be introduced at political rallies as "the winner of the New Hampshire primary by a landslide!"⁵

Going for Bush's political jugular vein appeared to be the best way for McCain to revive his flagging candidacy. "If he's a reformer, I'm an astronaut," McCain said as his bus rolled from one political rally to another in Michigan. Pretending to speak to George W. Bush directly, McCain added with derision: "We're not letting you get away with that, pal. You're not a reformer. Anybody who believes you're a reformer believes in the tooth fairy."

John McCain put some substance into his attacks on Bush. Speaking at Michigan State University, McCain charged that state spending in Texas during Bush's governorship had gone up more than 30 percent, whereas U.S. Government spending under President Clinton had risen by only 20 percent. "Now whom do you want," McCain queried his audience, "a big spender nonreformer [George W. Bush] or a guy with a record [John McCain]?"

McCain also criticized Bush for failing to do something about the influence of money in politics in Texas. McCain said: "In five and a half years as the Governor of the state of Texas, he did not propose a single campaign finance reform proposal in a state where anything goes."⁶

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More than 1 million Michiganders turned out to vote in that state's year 2000 Republican primary. That was twice as many voters as appeared at the polls in any previous primary or caucuses in Michigan. Governor Engler's efforts to involve as many Michigan voters as possible in the GOP primary had paid off handsomely.

The problem for Engler was that Democrats and independents flooded to the polling places along with all the loyal Republicans. The result was Arizona Senator John McCain swamped Texas Governor George W. Bush in Michigan. McCain won by almost a 100,000 vote margin, scoring 51 percent of the vote to Bush's 43 percent.

To add delegate insult to electoral injury, John McCain received 52 delegates to the Republican National Convention for his big victory in Michigan. George W. Bush got only 6 delegates. In the overall delegate race, McCain suddenly was leading Bush by 95 delegates to 57 delegates.⁷

Exit polls revealed what had become a very familiar voting pattern in the year 2000 fight for the Republican nomination for President. McCain received 45 percent of his votes from independents while Bush took only 23 percent of his votes from that group. McCain also got more of his vote from Democrats, by 29 percent to 5 percent. Among Michigan Republicans, however, George W. Bush was the runaway winner. A whopping 72 percent of Bush's votes were cast by Republicans. McCain only polled 27 percent of his votes from the GOP party faithful.

When the results became known, George W. Bush continued to push the idea that he was the first choice of loyal Republicans and McCain was a party interloper supported only by independents and Democrats. "Republicans overwhelmingly supported my candidacy," Bush said. "It seems I'm getting stronger and stronger with Republicans as the primaries go on."

But Bush acknowledged the great impact of his losing to McCain in Michigan. "This is a long process," Bush said, as he had said many times before. "This is a marathon. And I'm going to

be in it all the way to the end. And some primaries you win, and sometimes, you don't."⁸

For John McCain, Michigan was a must-win state, and he won it handily. McCain's big victory among Wolverine voters dismissed once and for all the charge that McCain was a one-time winner in New Hampshire and nothing more. McCain sought to turn his support from independents and Democrats into a campaign asset, arguing that he was the candidate who could attract outsiders to the Republican Party and fashion a winning national majority in the general election in November.

"The great thing about this victory," McCain said, "was we have proved... that we can reassemble a coalition... that reaches out across party lines, preserving our core with conservative Republican principles yet attracting to our banner people who are independents, people who are Democrats, libertarians, vegetarians."⁹

That quip about attracting the vegetarians along with the libertarians was becoming a permanent part of John McCain's standard campaign speech.

The Michigan results illustrated the way the political make-up of a state can influence the outcome of partisan presidential primaries. Republican voters supported George W. Bush in Michigan just as strongly as Republican voters supported Bush in South Carolina. But Michigan had a great deal more independent and Democratic voters than South Carolina had. It was those waves of independents and Democrats, not present in such great numbers in South Carolina, that enabled McCain to beat Bush in Michigan.

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McCain's triumph in Michigan, coupled with the high level of compression between the South Carolina and Michigan primaries, created great problems for the news media. With only a three-day gap between Bush's big win in South Carolina and McCain's overwhelming victory in Michigan, political editors and commentators did not quite know what to say. A big part of the problem was that many a serious journalist wrote a big story on South Carolina, arguing that Bush

was now undefeatable, only to have the story being read as television and newspapers boomed the big news about McCain in Michigan.

A *Washington Post* media commentator summed up the problem this way: "The media's current infatuation with Big Picture stories, written in the narrative voice and awash in predictions, encourages journalists and opinion writers to simplify complex and fast-moving events, or to draw broad conclusions from scattered, conflicting or otherwise confusing facts."¹⁰

Thus the media had to replace the story of Bush's big comeback in South Carolina with a new story about McCain's great resurgence in Michigan. Suddenly the year 2000 Republican nomination for President was up for grabs again, with Bush and McCain apparently running even. Perhaps the next round of GOP primaries, to be held in Virginia, Washington state, and North Dakota, would tell the tale.

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 9:

1. James Bennet, "Michigan Finds Itself In A Secondhand Role As Primary Nears," *New York Times*, February 17, 2000, p. A21.
2. Janelle Carter, "Bush Says Dems Skewing Primary," *Denver Post*, February 14, 2000, p. 2A.
3. James Bennet with Keith Bradsher, "Republicans Again Courting Democrats And Independents," *New York Times*, February 21, 2000.
4. Alison Mitchell and Frank Bruni, "Bush And McCain Swap Strategies For The Next Battle," *New York Times*, February 21, 2000.
5. Richard L. Berke, "After Stumbling In South Carolina, McCain Is Trying To Regain His Footing," *New York Times*, February 22, 2000.
6. Bush and McCain campaign quotes from Alison Mitchell and Frank Bruni, "Bush And McCain Swap Strategies For The Next Battle," *New York Times*, February 21, 2000.
7. "By The Numbers; Where They Stand," *New York Times*, February 24, 2000, p. A19.
8. Richard L. Berke, "McCain Rebounds In Michigan, Buoyed By A Big Crossover Vote, And Wins

Easily In Home State," *New York Times*, February 23, 2000, p. A1.

9. David Barstow, "Confidence Restored, McCain Trumpets His Conservatism And Reaches Out," *New York Times*, February 24, 2000, p. A19.

10. Richard Morin, "The Big Picture Is Out Of Focus," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, March 6, 2000, p. 21.