

15. JUSTIFICATION FOR THE SPORTS PLAYOFF SYSTEM

Back in the good old days, say the 1940s and 1950s, professional sports in the United States got along without finishing the season with a series of playoff games between the better teams. Take for instance professional baseball. There were two leagues, the American League and the National League, each one composed of eight teams. The teams in each league played against one another over a long season, which at that time stretched from May to September. At the end of the season, the team with the best record in the American League faced off against the team with the best record in the National League. A set of seven baseball games, the World Series, determined which of the two teams was the World Champion.

There were problems with organizing sports competition in this manner. In a number of years, one team would pile up a significant lead over the other seven teams in that particular league. At some point, often as early as late July, sports editors and sports reporters would informally declare the race to be over and begin acting on the near mathematical certainty the league winner for that particular year was already known. This process was facilitated by the fact that a baseball season is a set number of games long and the point at which a league-leading team became a definite winner was simple to calculate.

The effects of declaring the certain winner in the middle of the baseball season were readily apparent. Increasing numbers of baseball fans would attend games played by the designated league winner, the audience excited to see a team that was definitely, or almost definitely, headed for the World Series. In the case of teams that were not so blessed, attendance at baseball games dropped dramatically. Even enthusiastic hometown fans lost interest when their team was declared out-of-the-running. There was nothing drearier than watching a late season game between two teams that

had no chance of winning the league championship. There would be very few fans in the stands and very little spirit or initiative shown by the players on the field.

This contrasted dramatically with the interest and excitement generated by the World Series. Because the World Championship was at stake, tickets to World Series baseball games were difficult to get because so many people wanted to see such important games. The players on the two league champion teams played with great enthusiasm and concentration. And, as would be expected, the sports press covered every last development and detail in such games, thereby contributing to and enhancing the public enthusiasm for such crucial sporting events.

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In many respects, the present presidential nominating system in the United States suffers from all the same ills as baseball without playoffs. At the start of the primary "season," a number of candidates in one political party begin running against each other for the party's nomination for president. If one candidate starts to build a substantial lead over all the other candidates, interest in those other candidates begins to drop dramatically. Just as baseball fans stop attending the games of losing teams, voters stop paying attention to the campaign news and campaign advertisements of losing candidates.

But, similar to losing baseball teams that continue to play meaningless ball games, losing candidates for president often continue to run in meaningless presidential primaries. And states go on mechanically holding such primaries, even though the eventual winner of the party nomination is already known and there is virtually no press or public interest in the presidential primary.

This phenomenon of presidential winners being determined early in the primary "season" is known as **early closure**. Any reasonable proposal for reforming the presidential nominating system

will have to put an end to early closure and the string of **irrelevant primaries** that occur following early closure.

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The solution to the problem of a baseball season made dismal by early closure and irrelevant late season games was sports playoffs. A mini-season was added at the end of the regular season in which four teams, rather than just one team, had an equal chance at winning the league championship. The four teams were divided into two groups of two teams. In each case, those two teams would play each other in a mini-World Series five games long to win a playoff championship. Then the two playoff champions would meet in a seven-game series for the league championship.

The **sports playoff system** had a number of beneficial effects, some of them obvious and some of them not so obvious. The most observable effect was to greatly increase player activity as well as fan and press interest at the end of the season. In each of the major baseball leagues, the American and the National, there were four winning teams at the end of the season rather than only one winning team. This meant that fans were going out to games and local sports reporters were writing exciting baseball stories in four cities rather than just one city.

And with four teams in each league eligible to qualify for the playoffs, this made the end of the baseball season particularly exciting to watch. Perhaps as many as six or seven teams might be in the running for one of the four playoff spots in a particular league as the regular season drew to a close. This raised public and press interest in even more cities, with substantial increases in late season attendance at games and a tremendous expansion in sports press coverage.

Thus the real merit of the sports playoff system was that it created **multiple winners** in each league at the end of the baseball season rather than only one winner.

There was another advantage to the sports playoff system once the playoff games had begun. The teams that lost a playoff series or the league championship series were automatically eliminated from the fray. The players on the losing teams were not allowed to hang around on the field and get in the way of the winning players as they began their next series of baseball games.

The above statement is obvious, almost to the point of imbecility. But if one stops to think about it, losing players hanging around on the field and getting in the way at future games is exactly what happens with the existing presidential nominating system in the United States. Losing candidates who have no chance of winning continue to run in the later presidential primaries, often performing in ways that injure the campaigns of those candidates who still do have a chance of winning.

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Clearly the general election in November is the World Series of the presidential selection process. The candidates of the Democratic and Republican parties square off against each other in a two-person struggle for the White House in which there can be only one winner. Public and press attention are highly focused in such an election campaign. In fact, the November general election for president is the most visible and important election held in the United States.

Third parties are occasionally a factor in U.S. presidential elections, particularly when the contest between the Democratic and Republican candidates is a close one. But, ever since 1852, the winner of the presidential general election in the United States has been either a Democrat or a Republican, just as the winner of the World Series has been the champion of either the American League or the National League.

And the competition for a major party nomination for president can be compared to winning

the championship in either the American League or the National League. Winning in your particular league does not guarantee the ultimate victory in the World Series, but it is the only way to get into the World Series.

United States presidential primaries and caucuses, as presently constituted, badly need to be switched to the sports playoff system. Such a practice would be designed to reduce the chances of early closure, to produce multiple winners at various stages in the primary process, and to systematically force losing candidates to quickly leave the field of battle.

The "Small States First, Large States Last" plan divides the presidential primary season into five separate primary election days, each one scheduled on a Tuesday. These five presidential primary election days are scheduled two weeks apart, thus giving both the voters and the press sufficient time to react to the results of the previous primary day. The states with small populations vote first, then states that are more populous, and then the most populous states vote on the fifth and final presidential primary day.

The sports playoff model can very quickly be applied to this particular reform plan. After the first primary day, on which only the states with small populations are allowed to vote, only the top eight finishers (in terms of delegates won) will be allowed to proceed to the second presidential primary day two weeks later. After the second primary day, only six candidates can survive. In like manner, only four candidates will be determined to be winners on the third primary day. Only two candidates will emerge from the fourth set of primaries, and those two will run against each other for the party nomination on the fifth, and last, primary day.

The nature of that fifth primary day is important. The major parties assign convention delegates to the individual states roughly on the basis of a state's representation in the Electoral

College. That means the most populous states have the largest numbers of delegate votes. In fact, the twelve states that would be voting on the fifth and final primary day would share, among them, almost half of the total number of delegates slated to attend the national convention. With such a large pot of delegates at stake, it would be very likely that the eventual winner, in most presidential years, would definitely be determined on that fifth primary day.

Another way to look at this proposed reform would be this. On the initial four primary days, the less populous and medium populous states would winnow the field of presidential candidates down to two major contenders. On the final primary day, the most populous states would choose between those two final candidates.

One of the major drawbacks of the present haphazard system of presidential primaries and caucuses is that, in any particular presidential primary, the press concentrates almost all of its post-primary coverage on the single winner. All other candidates in that particular primary are described as losers. But with the sports playoff system, there are multiple winners, i.e, those candidates who advance to the next round of primaries. Indeed, there are multiple winners on every one of the four primary days except for the last one. On that day, of course, the final party nominee is chosen by the most populous states.

Another asset of the sports playoff system is that excitement and intensity build as the process goes on. This contrasts strongly with the existing nominating system, where one candidate tends to build a large lead over the rest of the field and interest in the upcoming primaries and caucuses quickly fades. If the existing system is **frontloaded** and characterized by **early closure**, the sports playoff system will be **backloaded** and, in most presidential years, will go down to the wire with the winner being decided on the fifth and final day of voting. Such a phenomenon might

be described as **end closure**.

Keep in mind there will be distinct differences between the electorates that vote on each of the five primary days. Early in the process the least populous states will be voting. These are states, generally speaking, that tend to be more rural and conservative in character. On the fifth and last day, however, the most populous states will be voting. Again, speaking on a general basis, these states tend to be more urban, suburban, and thus more liberal in character.

The point here is that individual candidates will fare differently on each of the five primary days because of these differences in each of the five groups of states. Thus a liberal candidate who did not run very well on the first three primary days might do very much better in the last two elections where more liberal voters are found in the electorate. These uncertainties generated by the different electorates participating on each of the five days will only add to the excitement and interest in the later stages of the presidential primary and caucuses process.

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Seeking to reform the presidential nominating system in the United States is a daunting task. Both the politicians and the working press have an interest in maintaining the status quo. The present haphazard system is at least familiar to those two groups. And neither the politicians nor the press have a particular interest in seeing that party voters in all 50 states and the District of Columbia get to participate in a presidential primary or caucus in a significant and meaningful way.

But, if reform is to be tried, the **Small States First; Large States Last** plan, as modified with the **Sports Playoff System**, offers a reasonable opportunity to create a more interesting and more fair presidential nominating system.