

Secretary Gale submitted this article to Nebraska newspapers for their consideration.

Regional primaries offer a better way for presidential nominations

By John Gale

Most everyone I talk to has been turned off by the messy spectacle of this year's presidential nomination process. Since the nomination process only occurs every four years, we tend to forget about the scramble of states to the front of the line and the lack of any rhyme or reason to the process.

We have witnessed the longest, most expensive and most front-loaded presidential primary campaign in American history. It can best be described as chaotic, disorganized and irrational.

The process has done a great disservice to voters, candidates and our country.

There is a much better way to do this. The National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS), a bipartisan group representing the nation's chief state election officials (including myself), has developed such a plan and has pitched it to the two major political parties.

The NASS plan would divide the country into geographical regions – East, South, Midwest and West – and spread out the primaries and caucuses over a period of four months, beginning in March of each cycle. The voting order of the regions would rotate every four years.

Under the plan, the traditional lead-off contests in Iowa and New Hampshire would still come first. The two states would serve as a warm-up to give lesser-known, under-funded candidates the chance to establish themselves as strong competitors in the larger, regional competitions that would follow.

Compared to the present arrangement, the NASS plan has numerous advantages:

--It would stop the front-loading of the calendar, so states are not pitted against each other to land an early spot in the voting process.

--It would provide a more reasonable time frame and calendar for selecting presidential nominees by staggering the voting over a period of four months in an effective order. This would give voters a longer look at the candidates.

--It would ensure that a significant portion of voters across the country will get to participate in the process.

--It would encourage candidates to become well versed on public policy issues affecting all regions of the country – not just those taking priority in early voting states.

--It would avoid having the campaign season in the midst of the busy holiday season between Thanksgiving and New Year's Eve, which creates problems for voters, election officials and campaigns.

--It would provide a more level playing field for candidates. A front-loaded schedule gives highly-funded candidates with national name recognition a huge advantage from the start.

For decades, Nebraska has been hindered by the fact that its presidential primary was part of the May primary election. This primary date has been a firm resolve of the Legislature to balance the interests of all candidates, including state senators. By that time, the Republican and Democratic presidential nominees usually have been determined.

The last time Nebraska attracted major interest to its May presidential primary was 1968. Candidates such as Robert Kennedy and Richard Nixon campaigned in the state.

Tired of not being a player in the nominating process, the Nebraska Democratic Party abandoned the May primary this year and held presidential caucuses on Feb. 9.

Under the NASS plan, Nebraska would be assigned to the Midwest region. Like the rest of the country, Nebraska's voting time frame would rotate and it would get a fair shot at impacting the nomination process.

NASS has appealed to the national Republican and Democratic parties to overhaul the nomination process for the 2012 election.

The Republican Party is considering a proposal that would dramatically restructure its presidential nomination process. The Republican proposal borrows some elements from the NASS plan. The Republican plan would divide the country into four pods, not on a geographical basis but on groupings with roughly equal populations.

The Democratic Party also has indicated that it will examine its nomination process.

Let's hope the Republican and Democratic parties succeed in making major improvements. The national interest requires a vastly improved system.

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