Proposal for Primary Reform: Demote Iowa and New Hampshire

Many Americans have been noticing, with more frequency, the inconvenient truth that our democratic system, by design, is actually not very democratic. The design was planned originally by the Founding Fathers who created the country—many of them owned actual slaves, and neither they nor women nor men below a certain economic class were allowed to participate. Even then, the Electoral College was thought up as a further check by the elites against any occasional rabble-rouser elected by the people but not approved by the elites. That the people have three times voted for a president (1876, 1888, and 2000) yet witnessed the losing candidate inaugurated shows that the system has worked as designed. Among the other quirks that hinder true democracy (such as gerrymandering, voting restrictions, limited voting dates, the existence of the Senate, and others that I have previously discussed in my post Republican Reactionaries and the Road to Fascism), the entrenched system of the two-party primary elections needs amended. I will propose one simple incremental change to somewhat ameliorate the representation of our country: get rid of the nauseating quadrennial ritual of the Iowa caucus and New Hampshire primary.

Possible Solutions

There are many solutions to reforming the primary system, which in itself would be just one small step towards a more democratic system as a whole. Many of these ideas have been proposed and discussed for a long time, but never adopted. They include the national primary (hold every state's primary election on the same day), the Delaware plan (hold four groups of primary dates starting with the smallest states and ending with the largest), and many variations of a random rotating

primary state order. I ask myself why New Hampshire (which awards only 20 “delegates” for Republicans and 24 for Democrats) has about 1000 times more power in selecting candidates than the most populous state of California (which awards 172 Republican delegates, and 546 for Democrats). Why does California, for example, not hold its primary until June when the candidate has almost always already been chosen by much smaller states? California has almost 40 million people, or 12% of the entire nation, and it is obviously very diverse (only 40% white). For that matter, why do Texas, New York, and Florida (27, 20, and 20 million people respectively) not all hold earlier primaries, perhaps together on the same day as California, to allow a much wider and more diverse set of people choose candidates?

It bears mentioning one more time that political parties were in no way prescribed by the Constitution and were famously warned against by George Washington; yet there has been a de facto rule of the two-party system since Washington retired back to his slave plantation at Mt. Vernon. I have not done any thorough research on how political parties have chosen their candidates, but I think it is safe to say that it has always been as fraught with corruption as it is today (compare Thoreau’s 1849 “Civil Disobedience”, in which he discusses how unrepresentative candidates are chosen by elites and how he is stuck paying taxes for slavery and war against Mexico, neither of which he supported). As for the current system, things are still apparently mostly decided upon by party elites in proverbial smoke-filled rooms, with the voters expected to do nothing more than conform and foot the bill.

The Iowa Caucus

Let’s move on to Iowa. American elections go on much too long (they’re virtually eternal at this point) and cost much too much (we could literally feed and educate the starving people of the world for years with the cost of a single American

election). Much of the early time and money is dedicated to the strange spectacle of the non-binding caucus of Iowa voters. It is a caucus, not an election, because you have to arrive and participate in the nominating process for hours instead of simply casting a quick ballot. It is non-binding because delegates are allowed to change the candidate they support before the party's convention.

I will grant that it is very difficult to create and maintain a perfect political system, and if we agree that democracy is the best, or least worst, system, then the participatory caucus system of elections may not be in itself a bad thing. Regardless, it does not work for federal elections in a country of 320 million people. Iowa is a state of three million people (less than 1 percent of the nation), and its population is 92% white and much more rural than most of the country. In other words, it barely resembles America as a whole (which is only 63% white and mostly urban). Every four years, would-be candidates spend months and months (years in the case of a Mitt Romney or Hillary Clinton), building up party infrastructure in Iowa and pandering to its local power brokers. Issues like ethanol subsidies, which enrich Iowa's farmers, become centrally important.

After all this electioneering, one might think the actual results would be of public interest. The Republican Party, in a rare case of common sense, declares a winner based on actual votes. I can easily see that 186,847 people participated in the Republican Iowa caucus and that the winner received just over 51,000 votes. The Democratic Party, on the other, still has not released the vote count over one week later, and it's unsure whether they ever will. I have no idea how many people voted in the Democratic caucus and how many actual votes each candidate got. All we know is that Clinton received 700.47 "state delegate equivalents", and Sanders received 696.92. I have no idea how these numbers were arrived at, nor how one can split a delegate. Furthermore, the Democratic Party awards

something called “superdelegates”, of which it is estimated that Clinton received six and Sanders zero. What are they and why are they estimated? It seems that this party did not think the whole election was controlled and undemocratic enough, so these superdelegates are a combination of party officials and elected office holders who get to have a bigger vote than a normal person. It’s like when the dad’s vote counts for two in the family council, because the idea that the kids had a real vote was just a farce. That seems to be what the Democratic Party thinks about its voters.

The New Hampshire Primary

Let’s now discuss New Hampshire, the first actual primary election in the nation. New Hampshire is somehow even smaller and less representative than Iowa. Its population is a mere 1.3 million (less than half of one percent of the nation, and less than the population of every borough of New York City except Staten Island), of which 94% is white, and it is also more rural than much of the country. The voters of New Hampshire are famously libertarian-leaning and standoffish in giving their support to the revolving door of candidates that barge into every little diner in the state every four years. The media and candidate attention given to the New Hampshire primary is as much as every other primary in the nation combined. Why does such a small, homogeneous state continue with such outsized influence?

Voter Activism, Apathy, and Moderation

I did a perfunctory search about the origins of this current primary system, and it seems that it has been in place since 1968, when protests at the Democratic Convention caused the party elites to exert more control. You know, because why would people be protesting instead of accepting the candidate

chosen by the elite to maintain the status quo?

There is plenty of blame to go around for the enduring corruption and general weaknesses of American-style democracy: the corporate media, the always-reactionary Supreme Court, high party functionaries, the entire "power elite" as C. Wright Mills called it. The most blame goes to the individual citizen voter, however. As imperfect as it is, our system still allows us to create from scratch a new government every four years. All it takes is moderate interest in actual issues that will affect our daily lives to enable such an outcome—a scenario I realize is straight out of science fiction.

Another benefit of widening the primary net will also make would-be candidates work slightly harder to appeal to a wider electorate, thus, in theory, even slightly moderating the tone of our political discourse. How does it help American democratic representation if the candidates to lead the country are always chosen by a very small, older, mostly white, mostly rural set of voters? There are many ways to reform our democracy, but demoting Iowa and New Hampshire's primary place is one step in the right direction.