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TIME TO SCRAP THE IOWA-NEW HAMPSHIRE OBSESSION



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Some think of the Iowa caucus and New Hampshire primary as merely the opening shots of our presidential election. After all, there will be millions of Democrats and Republicans voting in dozens of states over the next several months. Most commentators, however, think of these first-in-the-nation votes as the whole *enchilada* — a candidate wins or loses the first two states and, bingo, the nomination contest is over. This makes no sense.

Iowa has slightly less than one percent of the U.S. population. New Hampshire has fewer than half of that. Although Asian-Americans and non-white Hispanics are the fastest growing groups in the country, New Hampshire's Asian American population is less than half of the national percentage; Iowa's relative share is even smaller. Hispanics constitute only about 3.3% of New Hampshire's population, as compared to a national share of 17%; Iowa is slightly higher with 5.6%. There are only a relative handful of African Americans in either state. When all is said and done, these two battleground states do not look like America.

Not only are these states demographically unrepresentative of modern America, but their voting procedures are somewhat bizarre. Take Iowa. Our nation cherishes the secret ballot, but only Republican caucus-goers have this option. Democrats must literally stand up publicly for their candidate. And both Democrats and Republicans must vote only at an appointed time on caucus night — there is no early voting or absentee balloting for those who are ill or who must work. If the temperature is freezing — or, typically, even colder — elderly voters (about 16% of the state's population) may decide to simply stay home. Yet, 17-year olds may vote as long as they will be eighteen by the general election. Finally, get this: those who are not members of any party or not registered at all may simply sign up as a Democrat or Republican at the caucus.

New Hampshire is also a potential free-for-all. All Democrats and Republicans can vote in their respective primaries, but independents (unaffiliated with either party) can join the GOP or Democratic Party on the day of the primary. Last year, a whopping 44% of the state's voters were independents. And New Hampshire residents who are not registered at all can also become instant-

Democrats or Republicans. So we are liable to see thousands of newly-minted voters affect the outcome.

These peculiarities might go unnoticed except for the fact that the only political stories these days are about Iowa and New Hampshire. Since 1976, Iowa's caucus system has played an outsized role, and, since 1920, New Hampshire has been the first primary. Indeed, New Hampshire insists on maintaining this role. If another state is audacious enough to bump it, the New Hampshire Secretary of State has unilateral authority to move the primary to an even earlier date.

Both major parties have acquiesced to this Iowa-New Hampshire stranglehold, and the candidates are stuck with it. Of course, the process is far better than party leaders choosing nominees at "smoke-filled" conventions, as was the case until the 1970s; or by congressional leaders, as was done in the nineteenth century. But the current situation needs to be fixed.

A number of alternatives have been proposed over the years — rotating which states go first; or even regional primaries. I prefer one national primary, at which only those enrolled in a political party for a decent interval may vote for their respective nominees. No one state would have a leg up. And we could extend voting for, say, a week to enhance participation. True, we would have fewer meet-and-greets in voters' homes, but the results would be more representative of our national parties.

A national primary would bring our political process into the twenty-first century. While we remain a nation of states, unrepresentative localities should not dictate how we choose the two major competitors for President. It is time to modernize our nomination process.

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