

commentary

from other pens...

Calendar shift tilts Dems' playing field

By Will Lester

Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — The Democrats' move to allow states to hold presidential primaries a week after New Hampshire in 2004 further tilts the presidential playing field toward a handful of candidates who are established, have the most money and the best political organizations.

The presence of state primaries near the start of the process also could alter the dynamics of the race with the addition of a big industrial state like Michigan or a Southern state like South Carolina. Those states are poised to push their primaries toward early February 2004 and other states are likely to follow suit. Democrats in Arizona and Delaware pushed for earlier primaries in 2000, but aren't ready to talk about 2004.

Democrats complained their hands were tied in 2000 during a five-week period from the start of February until March 7 when Democrats barred primaries and caucuses while Republicans held high-stakes' presidential contests. Republicans have set Feb. 3 as the start of their primary season for 2004 and Democrats say they want a level playing field.

Democratic officials reminded state parties, however, the window for primaries runs through June and they aren't encouraging states to move up, just allowing the moves.

Many state parties won't move primaries to an earlier date because of the added cost of holding one primary for the presidential race and another for congressional, state and local races or because legislators who control the process aren't interested.

State Democratic parties have to remain competitive with their GOP counterparts, said Democratic national Chairman Terry McAuliffe, so it made sense to have the two parties' primary schedule start at roughly the same time. And he noted: "There is benefit to the shorter primary schedule because the nominee will be chosen and we can begin to focus on a national coordinated campaign."

A Democratic rules panel recommended states be allowed to move their presidential primaries to as early as Feb. 3, 2004, a week after the New Hampshire primary and two weeks after the Iowa caucuses. The Democratic National Committee will consider the change in January.

The Democratic contest in 2000 between Al Gore and Bill Bradley was effectively over in about seven weeks — reflecting the trend that had already started toward a tight nominating schedule. Democrats are watching closely to see which states might move up this time.

"I'm sure you will find candidates maneuvering to convince states to move up primaries that could help them coming out of Iowa and New Hampshire," said Donna Brazile, a veteran Democratic organizer.

Established Democrats like Gore, House Democratic leader Dick Gephardt, Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry, Connecticut Sen. Joe Lieberman and North Carolina Sen. John Edwards are already busy raising money and establishing a network in case they run.

An early primary in Michigan could offer opportunities for a candidate with strong labor backing, like Gephardt or Gore. Early primaries in states like South Carolina and Georgia could offer opportunities for a Southerner from a neighboring state, like Edwards or Gore.

"Governor (Jim) Hodges has made it clear he would like to have an early primary in 2004," said South Carolina Democratic Chairman Dick Harpoottlian. "South Carolina could be the New Hampshire of the South. No one will be elected president in 2004 who doesn't carry a significant portion of the South."

The shorter nominating schedule could give an advantage to someone who carries Iowa and New Hampshire, or it could offer an alternative site to launch a campaign. It also has some risks.

"A lot of people have expressed concern about a nomination that's over too early," said political analyst Charlie Cook. "You like to watch these candidates under pressure for a sustained period of time to see how they hold up to prolonged scrutiny."

EDITOR'S NOTE — Will Lester covers politics and polling for The Associated Press.

The Goodland Daily News

(USPS No. 222-460. ISSN 0893-0562)

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N.T. Betz, Director of Internet Services (nbetz@nwkansas.com)
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Published daily except Saturday and Sunday and the day observed for New Year's Day, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day, at 1205 Main St., Goodland, Kan. 67735.

Periodicals postage paid at Goodland, Kan. 67735; entered at the Goodland, Kan., Post Office under the Act of Congress of March 8, 1878.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Goodland Daily News, 1205 Main St., Goodland, Kan. 67735.

TELEPHONE: (785) 899-2338. Editorial e-mail: daily@nwkansas.com. Advertising questions can be sent to: gdnadv@nwkansas.com

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SUBSCRIPTIONS: In Sherman County and adjacent counties: three months, \$22; six months, \$38; 12 months, \$72. By mail in Kansas, Colorado: three months, \$28; six months, \$50; 12 months, \$95. (All tax included.) Out of area, weekly mailing of five issues: three months, \$25; six months, \$40; 12 months, \$75.

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The failure of hardball politics

WASHINGTON — The real loser of the 2000 presidential election was hardball politics.

Bush thought he would lose the limited Florida recount ordered by the state supreme court, so he got the U.S. Supreme Court to stop it. The result was a victory in the Electoral College that gave Al Gore backers reason to question Bush's legitimacy.

Last week, we discovered the irony in this game-playing. A ballot-by-ballot analysis conducted by a consortium of newspapers shows that Bush would have won the election clean if he'd let the partial recount go ahead.

Gore made an equally fatal mistake. He sought a recount of only four counties — Palm Beach, Broward, Miami-Dade and Volusia — where he expected to pick up votes. Had Gore offered to recount the entire state, the analysis released last week shows him winning not just Florida, but the presidency.

So all this recounting was not in vain after all. While it doesn't change the results of the 2000 election, it teaches a valuable lesson about politics. Sometimes playing it cute is the most costly strategy of all. Sometimes playing it straight is not only the right thing to do, but, in fact, the winning strategy.

Both candidates paid for choosing cute over straight.



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• commentary

Had Bush not gotten the Supreme Court to stop the limited recounts ordered by the Florida Supreme Court, he might have won the election by anywhere from 225 to 495 votes. Even the most die-hard Democrats would have been forced to concede him his victory.

But had Gore been grand enough to make an unconditional offer of a complete county-by-county recount in Florida, he would have won by 60 to 171 votes, according to the newspaper analysis. He, not Bush, would be president of the United States today. Those "Re-elect Gore in 2004" bumper stickers, made to order for still-embittered Democratic voters, would be for real.

All this late-arriving wisdom actually serves to bolster the intense bipartisan support for President Bush.

Only 12 percent of the country believes that Gore would be doing a better job.

In fairness to the former vice president, no one on the planet, not even the man himself, knows the

answer to that question for sure.

What we do know is that the American presidency brings with it several jobs: head-of-state, chief executive, head of a political party, commander-in-chief.

It's that last job that matters most now in the hearts of the American people. It's healthy to know that George Bush would have been our war leader today with or without the intervention of the U.S. Supreme Court.

That fact, not clear until now, could play a major role in the 2004 election. Today, Bush is riding 90-percent job approval numbers. Three Novembers from now, that number could well be closer to 50 percent, and the country may be facing another closely fought campaign.

Which brings up the third irony: Bush's supporters never wanted the newspapers to go back and analyze the numbers. They feared a media bias against the Republican president. What they got instead was a verification of the 2000 Electoral College results. What Bush got personally was a bragging right he never thought he would get.

Chris Matthews, author of "Now, Let Me Tell You What I Really Think" (Free Press, 2001) and "Hardball" (Touchstone Books, 1999), is a nationally syndicated columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle and the host of "Hardball" on CNBC and MSNBC cable channels.

Candidates hoping for break on education

TOPEKA — The two announced Republican candidates for governor are looking for the Legislature to bail them out on the biggest and toughest issue of next year's campaign.

The issue is improving public elementary, junior high and high schools. Key questions for the candidates are whether school districts need far more money to educate children as well as they should be educated and whether the state will be forced to increase taxes.

In early campaign speeches, Attorney General Carla Stovall and State Treasurer Tim Shallenburger have both acknowledged the importance of education as an issue. And both have avoided definitive answers when asked if they would support increasing taxes for schools.

A definitive answer isn't required so early in the campaign, of course. Many voters won't turn their attention to the candidates until two or three weeks before the Aug. 6 primary.

Also, staking a position early could be a futile exercise. The 2002 Legislature, convening Jan. 14, must deal with both a budget crisis and the question of how much to spend on education.

Both candidates say they'll be watching the Legislature and Gov. Bill Graves. But both have made statements that show they're hoping legislators will make tough decisions that will render the issue less problematic for them.

"You don't expect them to come out for a tax increase for education, do you?" said Sen. John Vratil, R-Leawood, who argues that schools need more money. "All they can do is remain vague."

There should be little doubt that improving schools will be the top issue of the 2002 governor's race.

Many Kansas voters perennially put education at the top of their list of concerns. Good schools are a source of pride for communities, a way of attracting new residents and businesses. A good education also has represented a poor citizen's opportunity to rise in society.

The state faces real questions of whether children are learning what they need to learn, whether teachers are properly trained and are motivated to remain in the classroom, whether schools have the resources to support them, whether school districts are spending their money wisely and whether the state distributes its aid fairly.

Kansas spends half of the tax dollars it raises for general government programs — \$2.34 billion in the current budget — on aid to its 304 school districts.

Yet, many legislators don't think schools are good enough. Even the State Board of Education, which describes Kansas schools as among the best in the nation, worries about the potential for teacher shortages and academic declines.



john
hanna

• ap news analysis

When he opened his campaign Oct. 29, Shallenburger, seen as the conservative candidate, said the state needed to get more of its money into the classroom and to teachers. He noted steep increases in state spending on education, 39 percent alone since Graves took office in 1995.

"And teachers are complaining," Shallenburger told reporters. "I don't have my plan in front of me now, but we clearly are going to have to something about school finance."

During her first statewide campaign tour last week, Stovall, perceived as the moderate candidate, described herself as pro-education. She also said the state's formula for distributing money to school districts may need to be rewritten.

"We've got to try to do what we can for public education," she said. "We may need a systemic approach to that as we look how to best have the best education system in the state of Kansas."

The candidates then faced the inevitable questions about whether they would support a tax increase.

Both said it was premature to talk about increasing taxes.

Stovall said she wants the state to be careful in spending money, adding, "We don't know what it's going to take to solve the budget problems and-or to fund public education appropriately."

Shallenburger said he has no preconceived notions but continued, "I don't believe it's appropriate to start the discussion with how big of tax increase you want."

Both candidates have reason to avoid talk of a tax increase, of course. Such messages always have played poorly with Republican primary voters, who tend to be more conservative than general election voters.

Kris Van Meteren, executive director of the con-

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