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Head Strong: GOP needs new primary process, and fast



By Michael Smerconish - Inquirer

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The Republican presidential-primary process begins in 27 months. That sounds far removed, but the time for action is now if the GOP wants to nominate an electable candidate instead of one suitable for nomination but not a general-election victory.

That there has been an exodus from the GOP cannot be denied. A Washington Post/ABC News poll released last week found that just 20 percent of respondents identified themselves as Republican - the lowest figure since 1983.

Left behind in the party are the most conservative of voters. Their standing, coupled with the fact that the most passionate at either end of the spectrum are the most reliable primary voters, sets the stage for the nomination of someone in the mold of Sarah Palin, Mike Huckabee, or maybe Mitt Romney. Each is well-suited to excite the base, but when it comes to expanding the tent, you can check the box marked "none of the above."

"The Republican Party's nominating process is not designed to select the strongest candidate with the broadest appeal in the large states needed to win 270 electoral votes in a general election," longtime GOP operative Roger Stone told me last week.

It's time for the GOP to reshape its primary process. Now. The party needs a new strategy to give voice to its remaining middle-of-the-road voters. Recapturing the center will demand a shift in the way the Republican Party nominates its presidential candidates. I see three options.

Change the calendar. The current emphasis on smaller states with conservative electorates subverts the more moderate voices that actually have a chance to win a general election. Example: Since 1976, only once has the winner of a contested Iowa GOP caucus gone on to win the general election (George W. Bush did it in 2000, and he ended up losing the popular vote). The New Hampshire winner, meanwhile, has gone on to claim the presidency just twice after

contested primaries - and even that hasn't happened since George H.W. Bush did it in 1988.

My favored alternative? Reorganize the presidential-primary calendar so states with more moderate tendencies get a say earlier.

Republican political consultant Mark McKinnon, who has worked with George W. Bush and John McCain, suggested prioritizing Western states like Arizona and Colorado, as well as Northeastern states like Connecticut. Pollster Scott Rasmussen pointed to New England for potential bellwether moderate states. He called New Hampshire "the most important state in the process."

Regional primaries. Bob Graham, a Democratic former U.S. senator and governor from Florida, once likened regional primaries to college football's Bowl Championship Series. The title game, he reasoned, "rotates . . . from year to year among the traditional bowl games." Graham's plan would similarly carve the country into five regions whose states would vote every three weeks. Like the bowl process, the regional voting order would rotate every election.

Stone told me he favored this approach because it would force candidates to appeal to every section of the country. Meanwhile, making candidates actually run through the end of the process would allow for "a longer and more thorough vetting process for the candidates" and a more exciting one for voters.

The downside? Less of what Graham has called the "political screen" that the old-school retail politicking of Iowa and New Hampshire provides. Rasmussen suggested randomly selecting a small state to lead off the regional primary season to ensure that door-knocking and living-room town halls remain a significant part of the nomination process.

Empower the party bosses. Lawrence Jacobs, director of the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance at the University of Minnesota, points to changes instituted in the 1970s as a turning point in the way primary elections were contested. Responsibility for choosing nominees, he said, was transferred from party officials to the voters.

Rather than simply adjusting the order of this modern presidential-primary system, Jacobs said, the GOP could return to a time when party leaders had a more definitive role in choosing the party standard-bearer. The Democrats, he noted, are already moving in this direction by empowering superdelegates.

"Frankly, it doesn't matter if Iowa and New Hampshire go first - which certainly have moderate elements - or if it's Georgia and Florida and those states go first," he said. "It's the fact that in each of those states you tend to get this narrow segment of party activists driving the process."

Of course, the notion of allowing "elites" to overrule the will of the people isn't as politically viable today as it was 50 years ago. And there is certainly risk for the GOP in alienating its conservative base.

But 2012 will be a referendum on President Obama. And while conservatives might head to the voting booths kicking and screaming if the GOP nominee is too moderate for their liking, they're not going to stay at home.


As Jacobs told me: "That group, that conservative movement is now watching in Washington as Barack Obama I think is about to pass probably the most comprehensive social-welfare legislation since the New Deal. And that's going to be a very sobering sort of moment."

Time for the GOP to look beyond 2010. For 2012, the time is now.

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