

Terry Shumaker: Democrats make a wrong turn on the road to White House

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I WAS A MEMBER of the Democratic National Committee primary study commission that hatched the ill-conceived plan to sandwich another contest between the traditional Iowa caucus and the New Hampshire primary.

Former Gov. Jeanne Shaheen and I, the New Hampshire representatives on this panel, argued that this misguided effort to fool with the traditional calendar would result in decreased voter participation and make the already too early and too front-loaded nomination process even worse.

We voted against the calendar change, but the Washington insiders on the commission had a stranglehold on the process. At the full DNC meeting Aug. 21, the party made official its plan to take the Presidential nominating process from the hands of actual voters and hand it to party insiders.

With its retail politics, easy ballot access and low filing fee, the New Hampshire primary keeps alive the American dream that any girl or boy can grow up to be President and that anyone can run no matter their status or wealth.

As now Democratic Party Chairman Howard Dean said when running for President in 2004:

“We have to continue the tradition of the Iowa caucus and New Hampshire primary because it is the only way candidates with no money – but with strong support and who are willing to put personal effort into the process – have any chance at all.”

On Aug. 21, after a brief debate where New Hampshire again objected, this calendar train wreck was enacted by the Democratic National Committee when it jammed a Nevada caucus into the schedule just two days before New Hampshire’s primary. Amazingly, the party bosses completely ignored numerous governors and senators – and even former President Bill Clinton, a strong supporter of retail politics, who had advocated in June that the party should leave Iowa and New Hampshire alone in their historic places at the start.

At the Chicago meeting, the national party also enacted sanctions for states and candidates that did not comply with the new calendar. The novel idea of punishing men and women running for President of the United States is particularly disturbing.

My deep concerns about these new rules are not born of home state loyalty or “sour grapes.” They are the product of a deeply held conviction that something unique, important and irreplaceable in American democracy is being lost and that our party is seriously damaging its chances to regain the White House.

One only has to go back to 2000 to see that our electoral votes can be decisive. If Al Gore had won New Hampshire as the Democrats had in the two previous elections, he would have been elected President without Florida.

Apparently unconcerned with the desire of actual American voters is a key “swing” state to have a chance to interact with candidates, last week the DNC enacted the following penalties to “enforce” its new schedule against its own Democratic Presidential aspirants:

“A Presidential candidate, who campaigns in a state...where a primary or caucus is set by a state’s government on a date that violates the timing provisions of these rules, may not receive...delegates...from that state....”

“Campaigning” for purposes of this includes...purchasing print, Internet, or electronic advertising that reaches significant percentage of the voters in the aforementioned state; hiring campaign workers; opening an office; making public appearances; holding new conferences; coordinating volunteer activities...holding events to which Democratic voters are invited; attending events sponsored by state and local Democratic organizations...”

“The Rules and Bylaws Committee will determine whether candidate activities are covered by this section.”

I wonder what the Founding Fathers, who risked their lives and honor for our freedoms, would think of senators and governors aspiring to be President being disciplined by an unelected committee of Washington insiders for making public appearances or speaking to the press?

What about New Hampshire Democrats who continue to encourage potential candidates to “campaign” in our state, actually listen to real voters and discuss the issues? Shouldn’t they also be punished? Will the national Democrats in Washington now spend months debating and drafting special rules for us rather than planning a winning strategy for ’06 and ’08?

The looming confrontation between our state and the national Democrats, which may result in a year or more of primary schedule uncertainty, is unfortunate and could have been avoided. By engineering a calendar that puts a premium on money over voter contact, the Washington insiders have taken a wrong turn that will distract Democrats from the important issues that matter to Americans.

Terry Shumaker, a former Democratic Nation Committee member and U.S. ambassador, co-chaired President Clinton’s New Hampshire primary campaigns in 1992 and 1996.