



THE TV PRIMARIES

by Michael J. Robinson

Most of us have grown up with the idea that large states have more influence in the selection of a President than small states because of the peculiarities of our electoral system. The big states do wield significant power on Election Day because of the all-or-nothing quality of the electoral college vote. But there is, in fact, an even greater inequality of influence among the states during the nominating process—the state conventions, caucuses, and primary elections. This particular inequality can be attributed almost solely to the communications media. The political weight that accrues to some states because of this “communications advantage” has expanded exponentially since the advent of the present television news systems in 1963.

Three criteria help to determine the relative communications advantage of a given state: (a) the day on which it selects delegates (the earlier the better); (b) the democratic basis of the selection process (the larger the vote base the better); and (c) the journalistic tradition that has grown up around that state's selection process (the amount of news coverage attracted by a state in the last election is the best indicator).

Since it holds the first presidential primary, New Hampshire ranks very high on timing* and highest in terms of the other two criteria. In 1976, Florida and Massachusetts came out very high on all three, but no state ever approaches New Hampshire in overall news coverage.

Although California, New York, and other large states have disproportionate influence on who is *elected* President (due to the electoral college's unit rule tradition), their share of influence is less disproportionate than that of New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Florida when it comes to deciding who is *nominated* by each party. In fact, recent history leads us to believe that

*In 1976, Iowa held delegate selection *caucuses* on January 19, 36 days before the New Hampshire primary *election*.

winning New Hampshire and either Florida or Massachusetts—or both—may now be tantamount to winning the nomination.

During the early spring of 1976, Jimmy Carter and Henry Jackson emerged as the two most likely Democratic candidates. To most observers, Carter was virtually assured of the nomination by the end of April, but it was February that was crucial, not April, because by February Carter had won the three states that determine the true strength of presidential candidacies.

Henry Jackson had won nearly 300,000 more popular votes in states where he had been a contestant—1,880,644 against an aggregate of 1,597,186 for Carter in New Hampshire (February 24), Massachusetts (March 2), Florida (March 9), North Carolina (March 23), and Wisconsin and New York (both April 6). But Jackson lost the first three states—the “top communications states”—which have become essential for the nomination. The top communications states separate losers from winners. Whoever wins New Hampshire is perceived as the eventual winner and, what’s more, is assured continuing coverage. Nothing demonstrates this more vividly than the difference in news attention given to the results of the primaries in New Hampshire on network evening news and the attention given to the results of the New York primaries.

New Hampshire, which gave Carter his first primary victory, cast a total of 82,381 Democratic votes. On the day following the election, the New Hampshire results received 2,100 seconds of total news time on the three networks—an average of 700 news seconds per network. New York, which was Jackson’s biggest victory, cast 3,746,414 Democratic votes. On the following day, his victory received only 560 seconds on the three shows combined—fewer than 190 seconds per network. Thus, the New Hampshire results received 170 times as much network news time per Democratic vote as the outcome in New York.

Promoting Primaries

The process that made this possible began ten years ago when television journalism, quite indirectly, supported the expansion of the presidential primary election system at the expense of the caucus or state convention systems. By paying much greater attention to primary politics than to other types of delegate selection, television encouraged the growth of the primary system throughout the nation, as states, like candidates, sought free television time. By 1976, 90 percent of the delegate selection stories on TV were about primaries.

Iowa attracted such meager press and television coverage of its first-in-the-nation delegate selection caucuses in 1976 that Iowa, like so many other states, is now likely to switch to a primary system in order to secure the kind of coverage only primaries can attract. Even Minnesota, long the archetype of convention politics—where primaries have never been especially important—is seriously considering moving to a presidential primary system. “Don’t kid yourself,” a state Democratic leader told us, “they want the TV time up here too.”

More primaries have meant more primary voters and a larger percentage of delegates selected by voters in the primary elections. The number of primary voters and the number of primaries more than doubled between 1968 and 1976. This has been as much an electoral revolution as doubling the percentage of delegates selected through primaries, because primary voters are always considerably less involved in party politics than state caucus or state convention delegates. They are more volatile politically, consequently more vulnerable to “bandwagon effects” and “image candidacies.” This has been the most important factor in the growing “communicational” influence accruing to states like New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Florida.

Vicious Circles

What’s more, states that have already adopted the primary system, partly in pursuit of TV exposure, have a second card to play—holding their primary election on an earlier date. In 1976 New York and Massachusetts moved their primaries ahead in order to enjoy a communications advantage (New York even adopted a “second primary”). New Hampshire, not to be outdone, passed a public law ensuring that its presidential primary would always be first in the nation.

There are more presidential candidates than ever, now that any candidate who gives the appearance of winning in one of the top communications states believes he or she has a good chance of winning the nomination. There are earlier candidacies as well. Dark-horse candidates, or candidates challenging an incumbent

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President for the nomination, begin to cultivate New Hampshire up to two years before the general election is held.

The process is both a vicious circle *and* a chain reaction. More television coverage implies more primary states, implies more primary voters, implies more primary delegates, implies more candidates, implies more television coverage, etc. We seem, in fact, to be moving toward a 50-state primary system adapted to the needs of television news and influenced by the whims of the voters in New Hampshire.

Television increased its coverage of the New Hampshire primary by 39 percent between 1972 and 1976. Between November 24, 1975, and February 27, 1976, there were 32 more delegate selection stories on weeknight network news than in the corresponding period for 1971-72. Twenty-nine of them focused principally on New Hampshire. Television's affinity for New Hampshire increases with each passing campaign.

The one positive thing that can be said of this system of choosing nominees is that it tends to ensure predictability as to who will win, several months before the nominating conventions take place. Political mavericks, retired governors, and social scientists should at least be able to appreciate—and capitalize—on that.



TV News and the 1976 Election: A Dialogue

The issues raised by Professors Patterson and Robinson were discussed at an "evening dialogue" at the Wilson Center on January 18, just two days before Jimmy Carter's inauguration. Among those present to confront the academics were NBC and CBS news executives (their ABC counterparts were unable to attend). CBS and NBC were not in total agreement. Edited excerpts from the transcript follow:

ROAN CONRAD, *Political Editor, NBC News*: The central question posed by Professor Patterson is the proper relationship between what he calls "substance" (and what we'll call substance) and the "horserace" element in TV campaign coverage. I was surprised frankly, when I read his paper, that we did as well as