

Despite their differences, these two men had much in common, Levin observes, including a belief in “open debate, freedom of expression and religion, the rule of law.” It’s not liberalism and anti-liberalism that shape our political life, but liberalism, divided by the little detail of what we should keep from the past.

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Fixing the Presidential Primaries

THE SOURCE: “A Modified National Primary: State Losers and Support for Changing the Presidential Nominating Process” by Caroline J. Tolbert, Amanda Keller, and Todd Donovan, in *Political Science Quarterly*, Fall 2010.

WHY IS THE PROCESS FOR SELECTING the candidates for the nation’s highest office such a mess? In the absence of constitutional directives, it has evolved haphazardly over 200 years, and the result is a system that is deeply unpopular: The tiny and very white states of Iowa and New Hampshire have disproportionate power,

very few people participate, and chaos erupts every four years, as states vie to schedule their contests earlier and earlier to gain greater sway over the final outcome and to boost their economies. Political scientists Caroline J. Tolbert, Amanda Keller, and Todd Donovan have a solution that combines the best features of earlier reform ideas.

Seven in 10 Americans favor switching to a national primary—one day when voters everywhere would head to the polls. Such an event would likely boost participation, since many people don’t vote under the current system because the winner is often decided long before it’s their turn to cast a ballot. In 2008, less than a quarter of the voting-age population voted in a presidential primary, and that was a good year. The problem with a national primary is that it would do away with one of the greatest strengths of the current system: Since the primaries begin in small states, candidates without huge war chests and who are not necessarily the darlings of the political establishment can win with old-fashioned door-to-door campaigning. A

national primary would require candidates to be able to campaign on a national scale from the get-go.

But Tolbert and her colleagues aren’t too keen on one of the leading alternatives, known as a “graduated random presidential primary system.” Under such an arrangement, smaller states would vote early in the primary season, but the exact order would change every four years. Larger states would be allowed to begin holding their primaries several weeks into the process. Some critics worry that such a system would be confusing for voters and unfair to large states.

The authors propose a hybrid approach: Begin with a dozen primaries or caucuses in small-population states to allow unknown candidates a chance to prove themselves, but let these contests decide only a “tiny” number of these states’ delegates to the nominating conventions. In essence, let these early contests be straw polls. Then, when that phase is completed, hold a national primary. This approach would preserve the relatively open playing field of the current system and at the same time allow more people’s votes to matter.

FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

Decentering Kabul

THE SOURCE: “Defining Success in Afghanistan” by Stephen Biddle, Fotini Christia, and J. Alexander Thier, in *Foreign Affairs*, July–Aug. 2010.

SINCE 2001, THE GOVERNMENT of Afghanistan, led by Hamid Karzai and backed by the United

States, has struggled to build a centralized democracy. The 2004 constitution placed nearly all executive, legislative, and judicial authority in Kabul. But centralization does not sit well with local authorities in Afghanistan’s rugged countryside.

Past attempts at centralization have always failed, from Amanullah Khan’s doomed effort to become Afghanistan’s Kemal Atatürk in the 1920s to the Soviet-backed communist power grab in the late 1970s, which resulted in years of civil war.

“Put simply, the current model of Afghan governance is too radical a departure” from what has worked in Afghanistan historically and the “underlying social and political framework” that exists today, declare