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The Rational Choice

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John G. Matsuska (1995) argues that, “Citizens are assumed to be rational, meaning they vote if the benefit exceeds the cost” (91). In other words, the average American voter will not vote if it is too much trouble to get to the polls nor if their efforts do not provide sufficient gratification. While the reforms proposed by Thomas E. Patterson (2002) in his book *The Vanishing Voter* do effectively address some of the issues presented by today’s current election system, I believe they do not go far enough to bring more voters to the polls. My reforms consist of two major changes to the current election system. First, I will present a more detailed, altered version of Patterson’s proposed primary election calendar in order to help eliminate frontloading and increase efficacy. Second, I will present a slightly altered version of Patterson’s recommendation that the general Election Day should be a national holiday. While many different reforms could be and have been proposed to bring more voters to the polls, I believe the above mentioned reforms would be two of the most effective.

Before I continue detailing my proposed reforms, I would like to address why I have chosen reforms that only target federal, specifically presidential, elections. National elections have the highest percentage turnout of the electorate compared to all other elections (fairvote.org). Federal elections affect everyone in the country and every eligible voter can participate in the election process for the President and for their respective Congress members.
Since many state and local elections are held on the same day as primary and general federal elections, the increased attention brought to elections in general would benefit state and local contests. While different reforms would be needed to directly increase turnout, I believe increased turnout on the federal level would have a “trickle down” effect on other contests. While this is simply a belief and not claim that could be supported by evidence, it is safe to say increased awareness and turnout of national elections could not hurt state and local elections.

Our current presidential primary system consists of a very random order of primaries and caucuses decided by each state’s individual state parties and legislative bodies. This system raises many concerns including the issues of frontloading and lack of efficacy of voters in later primary states. Both Iowa and New Hampshire have state laws requiring that their caucus and primary be the first in the nation, respectively. Candidates and the media spend millions of dollars every election season targeting the voters in these first two states in an attempt to snag the momentum of an early win to propel them throughout the rest of the primary season. One of Patterson’s most detailed reforms to the United States’ election system is his change to the primary schedule. He proposes that the primary season be drastically shortened, starting in mid-April instead of early January, and the random order of state contests be better regulated (Patterson 2002). His recommendation consists of five single-state contests held on different days and then an Ultimate Tuesday election day where the remaining 45 states hold their primaries or caucuses.

Patterson’s proposed system, I believe, does have one major flaw. He mentions that, “The parties would select the single-contest states…” but that is all (2002, 159). No clear answer is given to how the parties will actually choose these five states. Would they try to keep Iowa and New Hampshire first? Would they select the same states every election? Would racial, ethnic,
religious, or gender based voting statistics and patterns drive their decisions? These uncertainties must be addressed in order to ensure the validity and success of Patterson’s plan. I am proposing the following improvements to his plan in order to answer the above questions and remove the two major concerns, frontloading and lack of efficacy, presented by the current system. I do not believe the parties should play any role in the selection process. First, the fifty states will be divided into five regions based on geography. This will place ten states in each region as shown in figure 1:

![Figure 1](image_url)

**Primary Regions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>1: Northeast</th>
<th>2: Central East</th>
<th>3: South</th>
<th>4: Central</th>
<th>5: West</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>Alaska</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maine</td>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>California</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>Hawaii</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>Montana</td>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>North Dakota</td>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>Utah</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>West Virginia</td>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>Wyoming</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One state from each region will be one of the five single-contest states to hold their primary or caucus before Ultimate Tuesday. Five lotteries will be held in the United States Senate, one for each region, to determine that election’s five first primaries or caucuses. On the day the lottery will be held, the senior senator from each state will place the name of their state in the lottery for their specific region. On the same day as the Senate’s lotteries, the House of Representatives will hold one lottery to select the order regions will hold their elections.

There are several benefits to these additional reforms. This system eliminates frontloading entirely because the calendar schedule, further detailed below, makes it clearly impossible as states do not decided when they vote. According to the article “The New Hampshire Effect in Presidential Nominations” published in *Political Research Quarterly*, frontloading results in candidates focusing their, “attention on winning specific primaries or caucuses while virtually ignoring others” (Adkins, Dowdle, Steger 2004, 376). By ignoring the “others,” or voters in late primary states, some would argue voters are being disenfranchised because while they can still vote, the election has already been decided or the outcome of their states’ primary will have no impact on the general election. For example, during the primary season leading up to the 1988 presidential election William Adams, a political scientist at George Washington University, said that unless the unlikely scenario of two candidates remained fighting for a nomination by June 7 occurred, the New Jersey primary held on that date would be, “totally irrelevant” (*The New York Times* 1988). This was proven in the 2004 Presidential primary in which only ten percent of the electorate turned out for the June 8th election (Chen 2005). The New Jersey voters clearly had a lack of efficacy because their turnout rates would have been higher if John Kerry had not, “already claimed the Democratic nomination, and
President Bush was running unopposed” (Chen 2005). This new system requires candidates to focus their attention on virtually every state; the nomination cannot be won in a few primaries and candidates who lead after the first five primaries could possibly lose the lead after Ultimate Tuesday. No voter would become “irrelevant” under the new system because the nominations could be won at any point in the primary season resulting in higher efficacy and higher voter turnout.

Another benefit of these new reforms is the random order of the regions hosting the single-contest elections. Currently, candidates can count on Iowa and New Hampshire to be their first contests and they can focus their campaign efforts in these states several months before the election date. This means wealthier candidates can start advertising and campaigning long before lesser known, lower funded candidates. Stephen J. Wayne (2008) expands on this argument and claims that the early primary, “disadvantages lesser-known candidates who need time to establish their credibility, raise money, and build an organization of professionals and volunteers” (122). Lesser known candidates exhaust their finances trying to win an early primary or caucus in order to gain momentum (Wayne 2008, 121). In doing so, these candidates place their entire campaigns in the hands of one or two early primary states. If they do not win early, they are out. The earliest a candidate could target voters and funds in a specific state in 2012 under my recommendations is February 21, as detailed below. This shortening of the campaign means candidates with fewer funds can compete at the same time as more prominent candidates. Another benefit of the recommended primary system is the elimination of “planned” home field advantage. Although a major candidate for president has not been from Iowa or New Hampshire in recent years, technically, if someone from one of these two states wanted to run, they would have an advantage over out of state candidates who may not have the same level of recognition
with the electorate. As Wayne (2008) has argued, “gaining visibility is most important at the beginning of the nominating process” (138). Under the reforms, candidates cannot plan on having a home field advantage in an early primary or plan on catering to the voters in specific states until the Congressional lottery is held. While a candidate can still have home field advantage if they happen to be lucky enough their state is drawn as the first of the single-contest elections, it would not be likely they would strategize their entire campaign on the hopes of one specific state holding the first primary, as they do now. Lesser known candidates can choose to focus in the first five contests or on Ultimate Tuesday.

Patterson (2002) suggests that the first of the five single-contest primaries or caucuses be held in, “mid-April” (158). The current presidential election guidelines set by Congress require that, “The electors of President and Vice President shall be appointed, in each State, on the Tuesday next after the first Monday in November, in every fourth year succeeding every election of a President and Vice President” (Legal Information Institute 2011). I believe for the sake of clarity and to allow candidates to prepare for the election, a clear date for primaries would need to be set by Congress just as they have set one for the general election. I am aware that Patterson (2002) does explain that his proposed dates are, “For illustration purposes only,,” but as for my reforms I would like to clearly select the dates I would recommend to Congress (158). I would recommend the first Tuesday after the first Monday in April as the date for the first primary or caucus to be held. This means that the earliest date the election could be held on would be April 2 and the latest date would be April 8. The Congressional lottery would be held six weeks before this date. I would agree with Patterson that the second election should be held two weeks later and the third election another two weeks after that. I would continue to agree with Patterson (2002) that, “The fourth and fifth would then be scheduled for the next two Tuesdays. A month
later…all forty-five remaining states would hold their contests” (158). If my plan was to be implemented in the 2012 election the dates would be as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February 21</td>
<td>Congress holds lotteries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 3</td>
<td>First Primary Election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 17</td>
<td>Second Primary Election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 1</td>
<td>Third Primary Election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 8</td>
<td>Fourth Primary Election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 15</td>
<td>Fifth Primary Election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 12</td>
<td>Ultimate Tuesday</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many citizens of foreign democracies do not understand why the world’s strongest and oldest democracy does not observe its Election Day as a holiday (Blinken 2001). Peoples that followed our example and fought their oppressors to found democratic states made their election days holidays before we have. In 2001, out of the 36 recognized democracies in existence at the time of the founding of the United Nations in 1945, the United States ranked, “dead last—36 out of 36 – in voter turnout” (Blinken 2001). While many factors contribute to this statistic, nearly a quarter, 21.5%, of registered, non-voters reported “No time off/too busy” as their rationale for not reporting to the polls (Census Brief 1998). If not voting, not participating in our democracy, not exercising one of the most fundamental freedoms of the United States is the most rational choice a voter has to make, then clearly our system needs change.

My second recommendation is another reform based off of Patterson’s suggestion that the general election date should be a national holiday. As mentioned above, the current presidential election guidelines set by Congress require that Election Day be held, “on the Tuesday next after the first Monday in November, in every fourth year succeeding every election of a President and
Vice President” (Legal Information Institute 2011). While Election Day is much like Daylight Saving Times weekends, where every media outlet seems to have a reminder to reset your clocks or go out and vote, most businesses, schools, and organizations function as normal on Election Day. For many, traveling to their polling station requires a break from routine and thought out planning. In other words, for those working or taking care of children, voting becomes a hassle. Is it worth the cost? Why should I be late for work or class or make my child sit in daycare one more hour so I can vote? Before we can improve voter turnout, it would only make sense to make it as easy as possible for the voters to physically arrive at the precinct.

To clarify, Patterson (2002) uses the words, “be made a national holiday” (181). This is where Patterson first errs as the United States has no “national holidays” because any such day would be an infringement on the rights of the 50 states (Stathis 1999). Rather, we have federal holidays, eleven to be exact, that require that non-essential federal employees be given the day off work (Stathis 1999, 3). While most states, companies, and schools follow in suit and also cancel work and classes, they are not required to do so unless mandated by state law. Although Election Day is not a federal holiday, ironically Inauguration Day is. The problem I have with Patterson’s “proposal” is that he only simply mentions the idea but gives it no body or structure for actually implementation or Congressional consideration. I would like to see Election Day become our country’s first National Holiday which would only be made possible by a constitutional amendment.

A national holiday, set into place by a constitutional amendment, could be written to require all public schools, companies, governments, and organizations to let out class and work to ensure voters could have time to get the polls. The only exception would be essential employees such as police officers, firemen, EMT’s, nurses and doctors. The employers of these
essential employees would be required to set up a schedule that would allow their employees to
 go to vote either on Election Day or on an early voting day if their precinct makes that option
 available.

In addition, observing Election Day would increase political socialization. For example, children
 would likely gain more exposure to Election Day if they did not have school. Many teachers,
 especially those of elementary school students, focus classroom activities around federal
 holidays. For example, turkey themed art projects seem to cover every elementary school
 hallway in the weeks leading up to Thanksgiving. Many students even now participate in
 Election Day themed activities such as mock elections (Joslyn, Linimon 2002). The effects of
 such activities increase political socialization in two ways, “First, children receiving information
 about candidates, issues, and the electoral process will be more politically active as adults.
 Second, the parents of children participating in the program will be more likely to vote…”
 (Joslyn, Linimon 2002, 25). While children at a young age may not be able to understand major
 political processes or functions, there is a magical quality to the excitement of the election of a
 new president. As they grow up with an increased focus of national elections in the classroom,
 “the children…turn 18 and begin to vote at a higher rate than they would have otherwise”
 (Joslyn, Linimon 2002, 25). Above all, this reform is a simple one. While amending the
 constitution is no easy feat, the idea behind it is already familiar- we have a “national” holiday
 eleven times a year.

As with any reforms, let alone Constitutional amendments, both of these recommendations
 would require congressional and state approval. My plans would be proposed as one Constitutional
 amendment. Contrary to popular belief, political parties are not run bureaucratically. The national,
 state, and local Democratic and Republican parties are all
separate institutions with no governing connection. Strength of state parties varies state to state. For obvious reasons, Iowa’s and New Hampshire’s parties are much more organized and well funded compared to other, less primary focused states. Essentially, this amendment will increase the importance of all state parties which is the key to it being passed. Any state in any presidential primary could be the first single-state contest which would result in a lot of media and candidate attention in that state. Both parties would need strong and energized state parties in all 50 states to prepare and advertise for the primaries. The parties will be an important force during the amendment approval and ratification process. Both federal and state level representatives and senators will be pressured by their state party leaders to pass and ratify because the parties will want the increased importance. While it would not be likely for Iowa or New Hampshire to support this amendment as they gain the most from the current primary system, states such as California or New Jersey who have very late primaries will be eager to pass such legislation (Berg-Andersson 2011). In addition, the increase in political awareness and voter turnout that will result from a national holiday will benefit all states, an important argument in support of ratification.

As with any reform, concerns will be raised. While it is impossible to address or anticipate every concern, I will try to address a few possible ones now. Naturally, with a congress that has an approval rating of 11% citizens will have fears of the validity of the Congressional lotteries (cbsnews.com 2011). In the Senate this process will be supervised by the Vice President and the Sergeant at Arms. In the House of Representatives this process will be supervised by the Speaker of the House as well as the minority leader. These leaders are the same leaders that oversee the formal counting of the Electoral College votes and their supervision has proven to be sound and valid in this context in every general election. I believe
concerns of fraud will diminish after the first few primaries are proven successful, despite the low approval ratings. Another concern would be long lines or insufficient resources as a result of more citizens heading to the polls. This can easily be solved by introducing newer technologies to voting, a separate discussion in itself, and by attracting more voters to become poll workers. With most citizens off work or out of school on Election Day, more volunteers will be available to increase the size and numbers of precincts to help reduce wait time. While not every concern can be addressed, I believe these are a few concerns that will not be major ones.

The reforms needed to raise voter turnout to its highest possible rate will be many and will slow to be enacted. Election reform, however, is on its way. My two recommendations, Patterson’s modified primary calendar and making Election Day the country’s first national holiday, would be a great starting place to bring more light to the political system and make it more accessible to the everyday voter. State parties will be strengthened with the new primary system and will fight for ratification as a result. People who were unable to get off work or out of class to go vote will now be able to have an entire day to get to the polls. Most importantly, our democracy will be strengthened because more citizens will find going to vote a more rational choice than ignoring our government.
References


Census Brief, “‘Too Busy’ to Vote,” July 1998.


