

"Enough with letting Iowa go first. The first primary state should be California." *Washington Post* Feb. 4, 2015

By Phillip Bump

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There was a time when Iowa resembled the United States: a couple of big cities, a lot of farmland and heavily white. But time passed and the United States grew more urban (81 percent to Iowa's 64) and more diverse (78 percent white to Iowa's 93). And yet Iowa -- and New Hampshire -- still stand at the front of the line in terms of winnowing down our presidential field, a position that would and does allow a state to send lower-tier candidates packing. (We looked at this last month.) Iowa is less than 1 percent of the population of the country, but it gets to go first.

Enough of that. It's 2015. Let's let a state that actually reflects the country as a whole stand as gatekeeper to the presidency. Perhaps a state like ... California.

Before everyone gets all hot and bothered, hear this out. One out of every eight Americans is a Californian. It's a bit more urban and a bit less white than the rest of the country, but it's actually a few steps ahead of where the country is going, not a number of steps behind.

More important, though, its *politics* are diverse. You have hard-right Central Valley conservatives. Southern California Republicans. Big city liberals. Berkeley socialists/communists. Humboldt County libertarians. Yes, the state as a whole is reliably Democratic, but we're not talking about a vote for president or governor. We're talking about the *primaries*. If California's Republicans and Democrats aren't more diverse in their ideologies than those in Iowa, I'd be very surprised.

One reason it's beneficial to have smaller states go first is that the winners only take a few delegates with a victory, preserving -- in theory -- the ability of runners-up to come from behind. A California primary would push the winner on to a steeper mountain -- especially if the state's delegates were winner-take-all. But it doesn't have to be. Delegates can be assigned based on performance. The candidates (and party) wouldn't like that as much, but it would preserve the appeal of having smaller states go first.

There are some for whom the prospect of Californians -- even if they're Republican -- picking a nominee is anathema. Fine. The first primary can be Texas and California -- same day, same rules. Part of the reason the United States is gradually looking more like Texas and California is that Texas and California comprise so much of the population of the United States. Letting those citizens narrow down the pool of presidential contenders makes much, much more sense than letting Iowa and New Hampshire do it.

One argument against giving a very large state an early primary is that it would almost certainly be more expensive. The side effect of that: locking out candidates who can't raise tens of millions of dollars. In theory, outsider candidates can gather momentum and money from early-state wins that propel them to the nomination. Just because that hasn't happened doesn't mean it can't, theoretically. So consider that point taken.

But if we can't bump up California, at least -- *at least* -- mix it up. Iowa's got this massive culture built around its caucuses (caucuses!) -- furrows in the electoral ground that really don't make much sense. Ring-kissing, goofy events, the whole nine yards. Mix it up. Let North Dakota go first sometime, if we're going to let small, non-representative states pick the president.

Alabama. Rhode Island. Iowa is a presidential monopoly, and it deserves to be busted.

It won't happen, of course, because it is self-perpetuating. No one wants to ostracize Iowa because it plays this important role in presidential politics, and doing so risks alienating people who in all likelihood will continue to wield that power. So nothing changes. Iowa and New Hampshire go first, Montana (often) goes last, and everything else is scattered in between, most if not all of the voting having zero effect on who a party's nominee turns out to be.

In 2008, the state's Republicans picked Mike Huckabee. In 2012, Rick Santorum. Neither went on to win the nomination. Perhaps this is in part because the rest of the country has a different political outlook than the good people of the Hawkeye State.

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