

“Sorry, Iowa, You Should Have To Earn The Top Primary Spot From Now On.” *The Federalist*. March 18, 2015

By Sean Davis

<http://thefederalist.com/2015/03/18/sorry-iowa-you-should-have-to-earn-the-top-primary-spot-from-now-on/>

A new presidential cycle is upon us, and you know what that means: shameless pandering to corn interests in Iowa. It happens every four years. Not because costly corn mandates are good for America (they're not). Not because American voters put corn subsidies at the top of their list of priorities (they don't). It happens every four years because Iowa, for some reason that defies reason and logic, is still granted the privilege of having first dibs on the party primary calendar.

Iowa is in the news this week not because a candidate did or said something crazy, but because Iowa Republicans are upset about a candidate's personnel decision. They're not upset that a candidate picked a bad staffer. They're not upset that a candidate picked a bad policy whisperer. They're upset that Scott Walker picked a firm to help with social media outreach whose principal, Liz Mair, has been critical of Iowa in the past. The head of the Iowa GOP demanded that Walker fire her immediately, and it appears that Mair resigned early Wednesday morning.

It wasn't enough that Walker flip-flopped on ethanol to gain the favor of the ethanol lobby. Now he and all the other candidates are apparently required to run all their staffing and contractor decisions by the head of a party that's only delivered the state to Republicans once in the last 30 years.

This is absurd. This isn't even a fight about policy. Tech vendors and social media staffers have no say whatsoever when it comes to advising a presidential candidate on policy. That's not how campaigns work. This farmland fatwa is especially absurd given the record of Iowa Republicans when it comes to picking presidents. They're straight-up awful at it.

Going back to 1976, the Iowa GOP has hosted seven competitive presidential caucuses: 1976, 1980, 1988, 1996, 2000, 2008, and 2012. They picked the next president once, in 2000, making them a whopping 1-for-7.

Iowa Republicans are not even particularly adept at selecting the eventual Republican nominee when the race is competitive. They got it wrong in 1980 (Iowa Republicans wanted George H. W. Bush, not Ronald Reagan). They got it wrong in 1988 (they wanted Bob Dole, not George H. W. Bush). They got it wrong in 2008 (they wanted Mike Huckabee). And they got it wrong again in 2012 (Rick Santorum won by a hair over Mitt Romney).

So to recap: Iowa has voted for a Republican presidential nominee in November exactly once in the last 30 years (in 2004), and Iowa Republicans have nominated the next president exactly once in the last 30 years (in 2000). This is not exactly the kind of batting average you expect from your leadoff hitter.

If coffee is for closers, then first-in-the-nation caucuses should be preserved for winners. Thankfully, I have a solution to this problem: instead of operating under a primary handout system, the GOP should require state parties to compete for the top primary calendar spots. That solves the massive incentive problem that currently plagues the party primary system. Why should the Iowa GOP care what happens in November, so long as it can guarantee that all current nominees bow down to Big Corn and all potential future nominees pre-emptively bite their tongues whenever they might be tempted to slander ethanol mandates and subsidies?

Republicans are supposed to believe in markets and competition, so there's no reason they shouldn't apply that to their own presidential selection process. Pick a handful of key metrics that will be used, be transparent about the formula and weights used to calculate results, and then let the winners divvy up the choice calendar spots among themselves.

What performance measures could be used? Perhaps percentage increases in the number of new voters registered, percentage increase in actual turnout, and percentage increases in money raised might be useful. An ability to deliver the state when it matters should count as well (sorry, Iowa, you get low marks on that one). A state's bubble status—how close was the most recent presidential election—might also be a good factor to consider so you end up with a candidate who can appeal to voters across the political spectrum.

The point of a system like this is to align the incentives of the national party and all the state parties. When state parties register large percentages of new voters, everybody wins. When state parties turn out more of their own voters, everybody wins. When state parties are able to raise more money for candidates, everybody wins. And when a state can deliver its electoral votes to the party's candidate in November, everybody wins.

Except Iowa, that is. An Iowa Republican party that's batting .143 when it comes to picking Republican presidents in contested caucuses is not a party that will come out ahead in a competitive process that demands results. If the Republican Party really believes in free markets and competition, it should require states to compete for the privilege of hosting the nation's first presidential contest. And if Iowa Republicans really believe that ethanol is the best, most economical solution to the world's energy problems, they shouldn't need to hold a presidential nominating contest hostage to get their way.

Competition works. Republicans should try it some time.