

S. 1905, the Regional Presidential Primary and Caucus Act of 2007

Good morning. We meet today to receive testimony on a bill that would significantly impact the time, place and manner in which Presidential primaries and caucuses are conducted nationwide.

I'd like to welcome the three Senators who are here today to testify: Senator Klobuchar; Senator Alexander; and Senator Lieberman. I thank you for your leadership in introducing this bipartisan bill, which I have now agreed to cosponsor.

The rapid-fire front-loading of primaries and caucuses that occurred in the 2000 and 2004 election cycles has dramatically escalated in the 2008 cycle.

Already California and 17 other states are set to vote on February 5 – a date that is now being called “Super-Duper” Tuesday.

And despite threats from both major political parties, Michigan could vote on January 15 and Florida on January 29 – which will only force New Hampshire and Iowa to move their primary and caucus even earlier.

In fact, the nation's first presidential primary or caucus could end up occurring this year!

Something needs to be done. The Presidential nominating process is too important to our democracy to allow the pell-mell scramble to continue. Congress needs to consider stepping in and restore order to the process.

This is not the first time that Congress has considered revising the presidential primary system. In fact, there have been more than 300 bills introduced in Congress on the issue in the past 100 years. (*CRS Report on “Current Issues in the Presidential Nominating Process, 9/14/2007*).

It's important to note that the idea of presidential primaries is not something ingrained in the Constitution – and it took many years for this system to develop.

For years, even in states that held primaries, it was the state party leaders or closed caucuses who chose delegates to the national party convention, where the real business of selecting the party's nominee occurred.

But in the early 1970s, a wave of reform swept through the parties transferring the power to choose delegates from party leaders to rank-and-file voters.

Between 1968 and 1992, the number of states with Democratic Party primaries increased from 15 to 40 and the number of states with Republican Party primaries increased from 15 to 39.

This new dynamic also boosted the importance of the early races in Iowa and New Hampshire. And other states, seeking to boost their own position on the political spectrum, moved up their own primaries.

In 2000, for instance, my state of California moved its primary to the first Tuesday of March along with other states, such as New York and Ohio, resulting in 16 primaries and caucuses nationwide on the same day.

This meant 70% to 80% of the delegates needed to claim the nomination of either party were chosen by March 7, 2000. The media declared the winning nomination on both sides of the aisle even though voters in fewer than half the states had cast ballots.

And, as I mentioned earlier, for 2008 it's become a scramble to see which state is first. And while the parties have vowed to punish those states that try to buck their party rules, the jury is still out on whether this will be effective.

In my opinion, S. 1905 provides a simple, common-sense solution to this problem.

Beginning with the 2012 election, it would divide the nation into four regions and have them vote in sequence.

The first region would vote in March, with the other three following in April, May and June. Which region goes first would be selected by lottery. It would also recognize the historic importance of the Iowa caucus and the New Hampshire primary and allow these two to go first.

I believe this bill would resolve the most difficult and pressing problems without adversely affecting any of the national parties, states or territories, or the voters.

I look forward to the testimony today and now yield to my Ranking Member, Senator Bennett, for his opening remarks.