

Senator Lamar Alexander
Testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Rules and Administration
September 19, 2007

I propose that we turn the presidential nomination process over to the National Football League – or at least take a lesson from the NFL. Then, maybe we could have a second Super Bowl where anything is possible and everyone can participate.

Take the example of the New England Patriots in 2003. On September 12, in the season's first game, the Buffalo Bills trounced the Patriots, 31-0. If this had been the first-in-the-nation Iowa caucus, the Patriots would have been toast. You know the pundits' rule, "Only three tickets out of Iowa." The Patriots certainly did not look like one of the three best teams.

Then the Washington Redskins surprised the Patriots, which was as unlikely as it would have been for Dennis Kucinich to upend Kerry in New Hampshire. But, in the NFL, upsets don't end the season. The Patriots played 14 more games. They won them all. Then they beat the Carolina Panthers in the Super Bowl.

The NFL schedules 16 contests over five months to determine its champion. The presidential nominating process uses the equivalent of two preseason games in Iowa and New Hampshire to narrow the contest to two or three – and sometimes pick the winner.

The NFL wasn't always so wise. In the 1930s, league owners rearranged schedules after the first few games. Teams that were doing well played one another. This was good for the Chicago Bears, for example, but not for the league. Fans in other cities quit going to games – just as voters in most states have quit voting in presidential primaries.

Bears owners George Halas and others created today's competitive system in which almost any one of 32 teams can hope to make the playoffs. Green Bay can make it because the league makes sure even small town teams have enough revenue. Prime time television opportunities are rotated. Each Monday senior officials in the league's New York office grade every call and no call to second guess even the instant replays.

Professional football has become America's game because it symbolizes the most important aspect of the American character: if you work hard and play by the rules, anything is possible. Eight of 10 of the most watched network television shows have been Super Bowls; 95 of the top 100 cable television broadcasts have been NFL games.

Every September, the NFL fields 32 teams, almost all with a shot at the playoffs. Yet every four years the presidential nominating process does well to attract five or six credible candidates for the biggest job in the world – all but two or three of whom are eliminated after two contests.

The dream that “any boy or girl can grow up to be President” should be the most important symbol of our country's irrational optimism. The professional football schedule has become what the presidential nominating process should be. If professional football were presidential politics, SportsCenter would pick the Super Bowl teams after three or four preseason games.

The problem is not Iowa and New Hampshire. The problem is what comes after Iowa and New Hampshire. At least 20 states will choose delegates in a one-day traffic jam on February 5 next year.

Our legislation requires states to spread out the primaries and caucuses into a series of regional contests over four months. Beginning in 2012, states could only schedule primaries and caucuses during the first weeks of March, April, May and June of presidential years.

The traditional warm-up contests in Iowa and New Hampshire would still come first, but they would return to their proper role as “off-Broadway” opportunities for lesser-known candidates to become well-enough known to compete on the four-month-long big stage.

In addition, at the appropriate time I will offer an amendment to this legislation that would allow presidential candidates to have start-up funds – to raise up to \$20 million in individual contribution amounts of up to \$10,000, indexed for inflation. The current limit of \$2,300 makes it too hard for many worthy but unknown candidates to raise enough early money to be taken seriously – leaving the field to the rich (who constitutionally can spend their own funds) and famous.

Together, these two reforms – spreading out the primaries and allowing a “start-up” fund for candidates – will increase the pool of good candidates willing to run for the White House and give more Americans the opportunity to hear their ideas and to cast a meaningful vote.

I am a Republican and a federalist. While Supreme Court decisions clearly give Congress the power to schedule presidential elections, including nominations, it would show more respect for our federal system if the political parties themselves did it.

Both parties have made good faith efforts to do this but have failed, largely because some power center within the party believed that clean competition was bad for the power center and used its power to block reform.

I believe this year the people have had it with this broken system and if the parties don't fix it, the Congress will.

Fewer than 50,000 Iowans voted for John Kerry in the 2004 Iowa caucus. 84,000 New Hampshire voters voted for him in the New Hampshire primary. Kerry may have been the strongest candidate, but we'll never know, since, in presidential nomination politics, we never play the whole season.

Over 90 million people watched the last Super Bowl. Perhaps we can learn something from America's game about how to nominate a president.