

Regional Presidential Primary Testimony  
Senator Joe Lieberman  
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Madame Chairman, thank you for this opportunity to speak about the legislation Senators Alexander, Klobuchar, and I have introduced to restore public faith in our increasingly cramped and unrepresentative presidential primary system.

Our goal is to transform what has become an arbitrary and exclusive presidential selection process into one that is fair, deliberate, and open to participation by as many voters as possible.

As my colleagues have explained, the bill would assign all states to one of four regions - corresponding to the Northeast, South, Midwest, and Western regions of the country. A lottery would determine which region goes first, and the regions would rotate in subsequent election years, holding primaries in March, April, May, and June. Each state within a region must hold its primary or caucus during the period assigned to that region. The bill would go into effect in 2012.

There are two exceptions to the rule: New Hampshire and Iowa would continue to hold the first primary and caucuses, respectively, before any of the regional primaries took place. I personally would prefer to omit this provision. If we are going to change to a regional system, there should be no exceptions, and I am concerned that these two states will continue to have a disproportionate impact on the outcome of the nominating process. But Iowa and New Hampshire share an historic, first-in-the-nation status in the presidential primary process and so, they remain the first caucus and primary states in this bill.

Given the significance of choosing the most powerful officeholder in the world, our presidential selection process must test the strength of the ideas and character of all the candidates and expose them to the maximum number of voters. It must, above all, be democratic.

Instead, what we have now is a densely packed primary season that, with each passing presidential election, becomes less and less democratic. States are forced to move their primaries up earlier in the calendar year in order to give their citizens a chance to participate, which in turn, gives early states disproportionate influence in the presidential selection, while voters in later states are effectively disenfranchised.

All one has to do is look at the 2008 presidential primary schedule to recognize the system is out of control. In bids to increase their influence on the presidential nomination, 34 states – with enough delegates to determine the nominee - are scheduled to hold primaries or caucuses before March 1. That's a complete reversal of what the calendar looked like in 2000 when just 11 states held primaries before March. And it

seems like every month, another state announces a plan to move its primary forward on the calendar.

This rush to select the nominee results in a process that starts too early and ends too soon. Before most Americans have started focusing on the presidential race, the nominees are effectively chosen. And then there is a six-month gap between the time the nominee is chosen and the formal nominating convention.

And there is another even more insidious effect: The more tightly packed the primary schedule, the more reliant candidates become on large campaign donations and the people who give them. The fund-raising primary this year has already eliminated candidates who simply could not raise sufficient funds quickly enough to be competitive in the first two months of the presidential year.

This is no way for the world's greatest democracy to choose its president.

Our legislation offers a fair alternative that would transform the primary season into what it should be: a contest between candidates who take their cases to the broadest possible slice of the electorate.

I was honored to co-sponsor proposals to bring reason to the presidential primary system twice in the past – in 1995 and 1999 – with former Senator Slade Gorton. What we are introducing today is very similar.

By creating a series of regional primaries, we will make it more likely that all areas of the country have a voice into the nomination process, and that the candidates and their treasuries will not be stretched so thin by primaries all over the country on the same day. By spreading the primaries out over a four-month period, we would provide the electorate with a better opportunity to evaluate the candidates over time. And we hope that voters -- not just financial contributors -- will have the lion's share of influence over who the parties' nominees will be.

The guiding principle of our democracy is that every citizen has the opportunity to choose his or her leaders. But the sad truth is this principle no longer bears a resemblance to the reality of an increasingly squashed and arbitrary primary system.

We need to change our presidential primary system to make it more reasonable, more inclusive, and better structured so that it properly reflects the significance it holds – not only every four years, but as a founding principle of our great nation. Thank you.