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HON. MICHAEL A. MAURO,
IOWA SECRETARY OF STATE
CO-CHAIR, NASS SUBCOMMITTEE ON
PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON RULES & ADMINISTRATION

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*National Association of Secretaries of State
444 North Capitol Street, NW – Suite 401
Washington, DC 20001
202-624-3525 Phone
202-624-3527 Fax
www.nass.org*

U.S. Senate Committee on Rules and Administration
Hearing on S. 1905, the “Regional Presidential Primary and Caucus Act of 2007.
Testimony of Michael Mauro, Iowa Secretary of State
September 19, 2007

Good morning, Chairman Feinstein and Members of the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration. My name is Michael Mauro and I am the Secretary of State of Iowa speaking on behalf of the National Association of Secretaries of State. I serve as co-chairperson of the organization’s Elections Subcommittee on Presidential Primaries.

I appreciate this opportunity to testify before the Committee on the important subject of the presidential primary system and specifically, on S. 1905, the Regional Presidential Primary and Caucus Act. I was elected Iowa’s Secretary of State in 2006. Prior to that, I served as the Auditor of Polk County, Iowa, which includes Des Moines. As Auditor, I served as the chief election official in the county for ten years and before that, I was the county’s Director of Elections for thirteen years. In addition to my twenty-four years of experience directing elections, I have been an active participant in the Iowa Caucuses and an observer of the various nominating contests around the country for decades.

This hearing is very timely due to all of the uncertainty in the Presidential election calendar just four months prior to the start of the voting. Florida has moved the date of its primary to January 29, 2008. Michigan has recently passed legislation to move its date to January 15, 2008. Wyoming and South Carolina Republicans have recently moved their dates forward as well. The Democratic Party has taken action to provide for major sanctions through the reduction or the elimination of those state’s delegations at the respective national conventions if they do not conform to the national political party rules.

With some states now indicating that they will move early, in violation of party rules, the states that traditionally lead off the process, Iowa and New Hampshire may move up their dates in response.

Uncertainty in this election calendar is causing problems for candidates, political parties and election administrators. Candidates can’t make long-term decisions about scheduling or budgeting. Political parties, particularly ones that organize caucuses, must schedule hundreds if not thousands of meeting locations and it is difficult to make changes on short notice. For Secretaries of State and local election officials, it changes deadlines for ballot access, hiring of poll workers, and the setting up of polling site locations. It is clear that these issues that create so much uncertainty need to be corrected prior to the next presidential election cycle by the parties or by the Congress.

One thing is certain, and it has been proven over the years: Iowa and New Hampshire do an excellent job in vetting candidates. Through the intense focus of the participants in the process in those two states, we have preserved a significant level of retail politics in our national nominating system. That allows for candidates without huge funding and name identification to have a greater opportunity for their views and capabilities to be seriously considered. It requires those candidates with the greatest resources to answer the questions of grassroots participants in the process. It also reduces, to a significant degree, the importance of costly media ads at the start of our process for selecting the next President of the United States.

The history of nominees in Iowa and New Hampshire speaks for itself. Recently the chief national political correspondent for *The New York Times*, Adam Nagourney, wrote about the importance of Iowa and New Hampshire. In his piece, he states that the outcry over the disproportionate influence that Iowa and New Hampshire wield on the Presidential nominating system is largely based on the contention that the two small states are demographically unrepresentative of the nation.

There is something, besides the small size of the stage in Iowa and New Hampshire, that sets these two states apart. That seems truer than ever this year. Iowa and New Hampshire voters display an uncommon command of issues, a sophistication about the contest and its candidates, and an understanding of history and eagerness to participate, that clearly sets them apart.

As Mr. Nagourney so eloquently points out, they have been going through this exercise for a long time, and it shows. That has been apparent at the dozens of town hall meetings this year, as well as dozens of voter interviews conducted by *The New York Times* over the Labor Day Weekend. The interviews suggested a disparity between these voters and voters in places in California and Florida, which are moving up their primaries to play a bigger role in the outcome of the nominations. Iowa and New Hampshire allow lesser-known candidates the opportunity to campaign on the same playing field as better-financed candidates. In Iowa and New Hampshire, meeting with the voters and discussing issues in detail are more important than sound bites in ads that are the staple of campaigns in larger states. Retail politics works in these states. The candidates, the media, and voters all benefit from the opportunity of seeing these campaigns up close and personal, and that would never happen in larger states.

The national parties get to determine how delegates to their respective national conventions will be selected. They have rules committees that have spent considerable time working on this issue weighing all the factors.

State legislatures approve the dates of primary elections with the guidance from the state and national parties. Now the federal government is looking for ways to address this issue, even though it is the belief of many that federal legislation can't impose a requirement on the states or the parties.

The National Association of Secretaries of State has proposed a plan that would select delegates by region beginning in 2012. The proposal was originally adopted in 1999 with modifications made in 2000 after four years of discussion.

As a result, my colleagues at the National Association of Secretaries of State chose wisely to leave Iowa and New Hampshire as the lead-off states in our rotating regional primary reform plan.

By moving forward region by region, citizens could more easily focus on the process, candidates would be more likely to provide some focus on regional issues and they would be able to more efficiently campaign.

The Regional Presidential Primary and Caucus Act of 2007 (S.1905) is very similar to the NASS plan. It also allows an exception for Iowa and New Hampshire to maintain their leading positions in

the Presidential process by holding their caucus and primary prior to the beginning of the regional process of the other states. And it calls for a similar plan of rotating regional primaries and caucuses.

Clearly the uncertainty in the Presidential election calendar needs to be addressed and discussed and recommendations need to be made.

Fundamentally—and I am not speaking on behalf of the National Association of Secretaries of State in this regard, but rather as the Iowa Secretary of State—I believe that the national parties should be left to determine how delegates to their respective national conventions will be selected.

I commend the Rules and Administration Committee for addressing these concerns and I will now answer any questions that you may have.