

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Montana's Agenda, 2005-2010

University of Montana Publications

Winter 1-1-2007

Montana's Agenda, Winter 2007

University of Montana–Missoula

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/montanas_agenda

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

University of Montana–Missoula, "Montana's Agenda, Winter 2007" (2007). *Montana's Agenda, 2005-2010*. 7.

https://scholarworks.umt.edu/montanas_agenda/7

This Newsletter is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Montana Publications at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Montana's Agenda, 2005-2010 by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.



Montana's Agenda

ISSUES SHAPING OUR STATE

THE REGIONAL PRIMARY

Giving the West a Megaphone

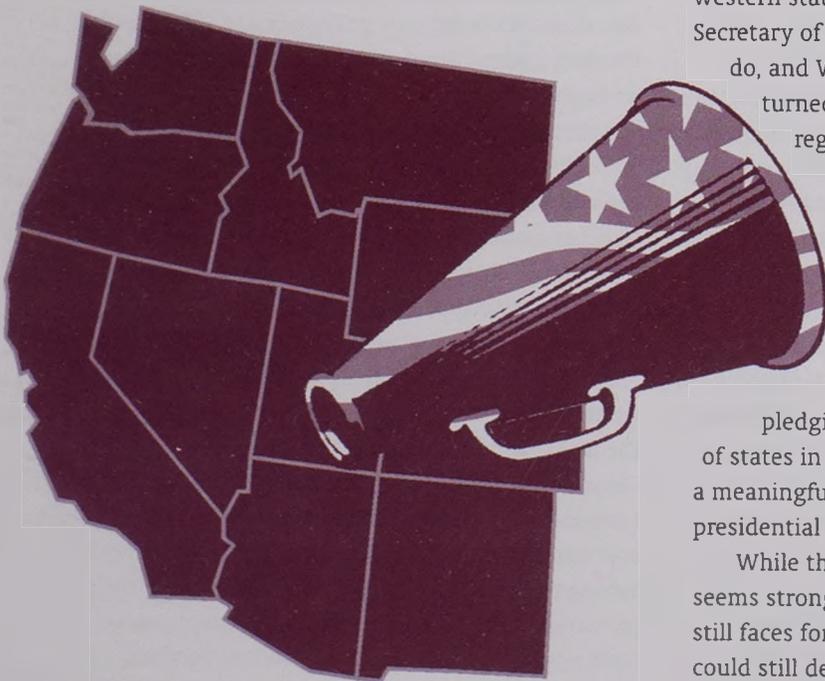
by Bob Brown
and Daniel Kemmis*

In the late 1990s, Utah Gov. Michael Leavitt, who is now U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, led a spirited effort to create a regional western primary. Several Rocky Mountain states would schedule their presidential primaries or caucuses on the same day. "Candidates will visit our states," Leavitt said in launching the effort. "Western issues will be discussed, and western concerns will be elevated in importance. As Western states, we already spend considerable time and money battling a distant federal government that doesn't really know or understand us. Often, that ignorance results in rules and regulations that are not just costly, but harmful."

Working with Republican Leavitt to persuade western states to sign on was Montana's Democratic Secretary of State Mike Cooney. But only Utah, Colorado, and Wyoming ended up participating in what turned out to be a less than successful effort at regional cooperation.

The idea might have died had not New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson given it life when he took over as chair of the Western Governor's Association in 2003. Democrat Richardson persuaded the WGA to adopt a resolution supporting a coordinated western primary and pledging WGA staff to assist any state or group of states in the effort. Richardson's aim was to have a meaningful western primary in place for the 2008 presidential election cycle.

While the promise of a western regional primary seems stronger now than it was in 2000, the effort still faces formidable complexities, any one of which could still derail it. This essay deals with some of these complexities, and with what's at stake for Montana and the rest of our region.



States use different methods to select delegates to the national political conventions. Even within a single state, the two major parties can take different paths to delegate selection. When a state chooses to use a primary election for selecting convention delegates, the state legislature almost always fixes the primary election date and other election mechanics. In Montana and Idaho, for example, legislatures allow voters the freedom to choose in the polling booth which party's ballot to mark. Most neighboring states require voters to register in advance as either a Democrat or a Republican and they are given only their registered party's ballot in the primary election.

State and national political parties also play a role in regulating primary elections. The Western Governors' 2003 resolution urged the major political parties to examine reforms to the nominating process rules to encourage both voter participation

and a discussion among the primary candidates of issues that are unique to each region of the country.

Democrats found this call for action timely. The national Democratic Party, following its setbacks in the 2004 election, convened the Commission on Presidential Nomination Timing and Scheduling (DNC Commission) to determine if changes could help Democrats nominate

candidates with broader appeal. One DNC Commission member, Mike Stratton, who had helped Ken Salazar get elected to the U.S. Senate from Colorado in 2004, urged the Democratic Party to endorse a western regional primary.

Western Democrats turned out in force at a 2005 DNC Commission hearing to back Stratton's proposal. Supporters included Colorado Congressman Mark Udall, then-U.S. Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada, and a group called Democrats for the West, who argued that a regional primary might help Democrats make Electoral College gains in 2008.

National parties, however, lack authority to order a regional primary or set the dates of state primary elections. What they do control is the number and seating of a state's delegates to the national conventions. The DNC Commission

eventually recommended decreasing the number of a state's convention delegates were the state to hold a primary election at the "wrong" time, and increasing the number of a state's delegates for picking a "right" time for the primary. This sanction could encourage regional primaries and reduce "front loading," the practice of scheduling most presidential primaries early in the election cycle and making later primaries essentially meaningless.

The Republican Party got into the primary-reform act before the Democrats by giving bonus national convention delegates to states holding their primaries later in the season. Because the bonus system did not achieve the desired effect, Republicans dropped it before the 2004 election. The Democrats, concluding that the Republican bonuses were too small to serve as an incentive, recommended a graduated set of bonuses that would have added up to 40 percent to the delegate count of states choosing the latest primary dates. The Montana Democratic Party, with the state's early June primary, would have qualified for the full bonus — raising the current total of 21 delegates to 29. The DNC, however, ended up rejecting the proposal for bonus delegates.

Democrats also recommended — but have not yet adopted — punishing any group of more than five states for holding primaries in the same week. Western Democrats opposed this idea because of its negative impact on a regional primary. A western primary would require regional unity, and the difficult task of coordination would not be worth the effort unless a critical mass of western states could be involved. Also, the Democratic proposal's five-states-per-week cap could result in the more populous states pushing the least populous states to the sidelines.

Republicans earlier explored an idea that would have had the opposite effect. Just prior to the 2000 election cycle, the Republican National Committee considered a proposal that would have systematically scheduled presidential primaries and countered front-loading. The GOP suggested having the 12 smallest population states hold their primaries on the same day in March. The 13 next most populous states would follow on the same day in April, followed by the 13 next largest states in May and the 12 most populous states in June. Half the least populous states happen to be located

Even within a single state, the two major parties can take different paths to delegate selection.

in the Intermountain West or on the Western Plains: North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, and New Mexico (Colorado, Utah, and Arizona would be in the second group). The GOP plan has been dormant for six years, but if resuscitated it could result in increased influence in the presidential selection process for Montana and other western states.

Democrats recently authorized Nevada to hold its caucus in January, right after the Iowa caucus, and South Carolina to hold its primary in early February, right after the New Hampshire primary. Neither state would lose delegates. The rationale was neither Iowa nor New Hampshire reflect the Party's ethnic makeup, which points out the inescapable fact that partisan considerations and primary-election reform are inextricably linked. New Mexico Gov. Richardson would undoubtedly benefit from a western primary as he makes a presidential bid in 2008, as would Arizona U.S. Sen. John McCain, now a frontrunner for the GOP presidential nomination. So possibly would former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, whose Mormon religion could propel him to a strong showing in the Intermountain West. But a western regional primary is too important an issue to be jeopardized by focusing narrowly on one candidate or one party.

Bipartisanship characterized a national commission on electoral reform chaired by former President Jimmy Carter and former Secretary of State James Baker. It came out against front loading and supported the proposal of the National Association of Secretaries of State to create four regional primaries, spaced at one-month intervals from March to June, with the four regions rotating their position in each election cycle. The proposal was flawed, however, because the nation does not consist neatly of four discrete regions. Under the Carter-Baker idea, the Rocky Mountain West would have been lumped in with the Pacific Coast, including California, and would have lost any focus on its special issues. It would be more appropriate to allow states to self-select into genuine regions and then apply the rotation principle.

Greater promise lies in the still percolating bipartisan, state-by-state effort to coordinate several Rocky Mountain primaries on the same day. Because scheduling primaries requires legislative action, a coordinated western primary can only be created by such a bipartisan effort across the

region. The Western Governors Association provided this kind of leadership in 2003 when Utah's Republican Gov. Jon Huntsman joined Democrat Gov. Bill Richardson in promoting a regional primary. Richardson said that he wanted to make the West "a force on policy and politics. . . . If we unite on a series of issues, the West acquires more clout." Huntsman argued similarly: "They (presidential candidates) can choose to compete here or they can choose to avoid or neglect us all together. If we are positioned early enough it does have consequences in terms of the message sent to the region and indeed the rest of the country." In Montana, both Democratic Gov. Brian Schweitzer and Republican Secretary of State Brad Johnson have endorsed an early presidential primary to coincide with a date chosen by other western states.

Support for a western primary comes from a sense of identity and a basic instinct for political self-determination. What it boils down to is westerners want their region to be heard. That is far more likely to happen if the presidential nominee of at least one party has earned western support by addressing western issues in western terms rather than aiming messages at core constituencies in individual states.

A regional primary would motivate westerners to identify the most important issues facing us. A regional primary would force presidential candidates to stake out clear positions on the issues the region cares most about. Candidates winning western primaries by addressing public lands management, rural health services, water resources, energy development, tribal sovereignty, and immigration reform would have little choice but to follow through once elected. A maturing West needs this kind of leverage, and a regional primary would be a big step toward aggregating that kind of clout.

**Bob Brown and Daniel Kemmis are Senior Fellows at The University of Montana's O'Connor Center for the Rocky Mountain West. Brown, a Republican, is former President of the Montana Senate and Secretary of State. Kemmis, a Democrat, is former Speaker of the Montana House of Representatives and Mayor of Missoula.*

A regional primary would force presidential candidates to stake out clear positions on the issues the region cares most about.



The University of
Montana

Montana's Agenda
(MPRT01)
The University of Montana

NON-PROFIT ORG
U.S. POSTAGE
P A I D
MISSOULA, MT
PERMIT #100



Montana's Agenda

ISSUES SHAPING OUR STATE

Montana's Agenda is published by
The University of Montana, Missoula, MT, 59812 and is edited by **James Lopach**,
professor of Political Science; **Carol Van Valkenburg**, professor of Journalism;
Jean Luckowski, professor of Education; **James P. Foley**, University Executive Vice
President; **Larry Swanson**, director, and **Bob Brown**, senior fellow, O'Connor Center
for the Rocky Mountain West.

Send ideas for future issues to james.lopach@umontana.edu.



The University of
Montana

