

Reform #17: Fixing primaries by boosting turnout in a national primary

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Summary of Evaluation of Impact on Criteria

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Impact Scale Definitions

- 1** No impact or negative impact
- 2** Low impact or impact likely only if coupled with other reforms
- 3** Moderate impact
- 4** High impact, including significant long-term impact
- 5** Problem substantially solved, even without other reform

Summary of Proposal:

We propose to encourage all states to adopt a common congressional primary day. Today, primaries are scattered through the spring and late summer, and voters often have little knowledge of the primary date and when they should show up to vote.

Improve Voter turnout: many reforms to improve voter turnout are unsuccessful. By comparison, this reform, while it would not likely dramatically improve voter turnout, would be a practical measure to improve turnout. Today, often people do not know when their congressional primary elections occur. Recently, many September primaries have been moved to August to accommodate requirements for sending out ballots to military voters. August is a poor time to hold a primary, as voters, party workers and media are less available in this month. National media could cover primary day rather than just relying on state coverage of the election. A single congressional primary day would also encourage national voter registration drives around that date.

Improve Voter Information: Again, as national media would cover primaries, voters would have more access to media coverage of the primary. Also, as we have seen with the presidential debate commission, a regular schedule may take hold of congressional debates leading up to the primary date.

With the expectation and regularity of debates around a known, set date, voters are more likely to learn about candidates.

Feasibility - the proposal does not require a constitutional amendment. It does not have a particular objection from one party or the other on ideological grounds. It is scalable. Even a “super Tuesday” like primary with 10 or 15 states holding a primary on the same day would have a beneficial effect.

Reducing Polarization: while one stated reason for increasing primary turnout is increasing the number of moderate voters that attend primaries, evidence of this effect is slim. Sometimes greater turnout comes from the turnout of the most ideologically committed. For this reason, we think that a slight decrease in polarization is possible, as the greater visibility of the primary may attract some voters who are less partisan, but may attract more partisans as well.

Improving Candidate Accountability – greater prominence of primary elections might (a) make it less likely that there be a shift in primary day to help a particular incumbent, (b) make it less likely that incumbents run unopposed. The election would be of greater visibility to prospective candidates as well as voters. (c) greater prominence of primary day would encourage regular debates, and issue surveys from interested groups.