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Montana Democratic Presidential Rules Increase Fairness

A Montana Public Radio Commentary by Evan Barrett

April 8, 2016

I am an active Democrat. I know little about how Montana Republicans select the delegates to their national presidential convention, but do understand the Montana Democratic Party approach.

As the presidential race between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders intensifies, in the Democratic Party we're hearing a lot about "Super Delegates" and see the passions of their supporters increase and the supporters' strident rhetoric go up as well. People and the press have begun to focus on the heretofore esoteric, remote and uninteresting state and national party rules.

Even though I am not directly involved now, I've spent a lifetime plowing this field. At age twenty-four I served on the Montana Democratic Party's "Reform Commission," created after the disastrous 1968 election. Later as Executive of the Montana Democratic Party I was charged with implementing the commission results and developing Montana rules that conformed to national guidelines. I served about twenty years on the Montana Democratic Party's Rules Committee. For the twelve years I served on Democratic National Committee and its Rules Committee.

National Democratic Party guidelines and requirements have been implemented in Montana to fit our state. I've participated in state legislation to "democratize" our presidential delegate selection process while also making it reflective of the preferences of the electorate, thus minimizing internal conflict.

Back in 1968 Montana Democrats followed rules that were essentially "winner take all," based not upon the direct vote of Democratic voters but upon who was elected to or sat on county central committees. It was truly was an "insiders' game." While it took about five years to implement, the first big change to improve that system created something called "proportional representation." Simplistically stated, if a candidate had 60% of the votes in a county committee, he/she would get 60% of the county's delegates to the state convention. And the proportional support for that candidate at the state convention would be reflected in the percentage of the delegation to the national convention who supported that candidate. That change brought a lot more fairness to our process as compared to the old "winner take all" system.

But, the numbers still reflected an "insiders" political game. So, in 1974, Pat Williams and I drafted a bill to re-create a Montana presidential primary so that the base of the presidential delegate selection process could reflect the preference vote of all Montana Democrats. Pat was not yet a Congressman but was extremely knowledgeable about the issue. We asked a freshman legislator, John "Landslide" Murphy, to carry the bill and it surprisingly passed. It allowed each political party to choose whether or not it used the presidential primary vote as the base of its delegate selection. The Montana Democratic Party did so.

By the way, the presidential primary has a colorful history in Montana, having been enacted by initiative in 1912, removed in a referendum in 1924, restored by referendum in 1954, and dropped by the legislature in 1959 before being re-enacted again in 1974. It has remained in use over the last 42 years.

The way we Montana Democrats use the presidential primary, when combined with proportional representation, has minimized intra-party conflict. Under Montana Democratic Party rules, the votes of the electorate for each candidate in the presidential primary are reflected upward through the entire delegate selection process. The number of delegates each presidential candidate gets to have from Montana at the Democratic National Convention is proportionally “baked into the cake” as a result of the primary vote here. There are no longer any fights BETWEEN the supporters of presidential candidates over the number of delegates they will have. If there is any fighting it is WITHIN the supporter groups of each candidate over who which supporter might get to go to the national convention, given the limited number of seats allocated.

This intra-group fighting is much less damaging than the inter-group fighting that used to occur before proportional representation and the presidential primary were in place.

So, as the race between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders intensifies, the Democratic Party rules here in Montana have significantly reduced the rancor and increased the accuracy of reflecting what the grassroots Democrat wants in terms of results.

This is Evan Barrett in Butte thinking about Democratic voters and fairness and looking forward to discussing the so-called “Super Delegates” the next time we meet.

Evan Barrett of Butte, has spent the last 46 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is currently the Director of Business & Community Outreach and an instructor at Highlands College of Montana Tech. These are his personal views.

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