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Trump Assault on Primaries Disempowers the People

A Column by Evan Barrett

September 15, 2019

Respecting the voice of the people is an essential electoral element to a functioning democracy. Since the Progressive Era at the turn of the 20th Century, primary elections have been a vehicle empowering everyday U.S. citizens in the selection of party nominees for office. People-oriented primary elections reduce the influence of the powerful, the vested interests and political insiders.

It was no surprise to see that the powerful within the National Republican Party have begun removing state presidential primary elections for 2020 as a means of ramrodding Trump's re-election candidacy. Heavens, they've even started eliminating caucuses, a less participatory process, as they seek a Trumpian coronation rather than an election.

The history of presidential primary elections in Montana reflects the dynamic tension between people power and insider power. Montana's first version of the presidential primary came after the 1912 passage of the reform initiatives of the People's Power League of Montana -- which also included overall primary elections, limits on campaign spending, prohibition on corporate campaign donations, and voter selection of US senators. That presidential primary ballot initiative was supported by 79% of Montana voters.

It established a separate spring presidential primary and was used in the spring of 1916, 1920 and 1924 before being repealed by a legislative referendum passed in the 1924 general election. This killing of the presidential primary came after years of opposition to all primary elections from the powerful Anaconda Company and its allies, including Governor Sam Stewart, who disingenuously used the cost of a separate early presidential primary as the rationale for its repeal. Fearing the people's voice and preferring control and empowerment of the bosses, they even tried to repeal the regular primary election for all other offices. That effort was unsuccessful but they did remove the presidential primary. Starting in 1928, Montana's presidential delegate selection processes were the purview of powerful political bosses and vested interests until 1956 -- a 30-year period in which the Copper Collar was tightened around Montana's throat.

Interestingly, it was the Republican-dominated 1953 state legislature that approved a referendum to restore the presidential primary, which garnered 69% voter support in the November 1954 election. In a way they were trying to serve the interests of sitting GOP President Eisenhower in a way similar to the current National Republican Party effort to serve President Trump. In 1952, using the convention method, the Montana GOP sent only one of eight delegates to their national convention supporting then candidate Eisenhower, while seven supported Mr. Conservative, Ohio Senator Robert Taft. The Montana GOP did not want a repeat of that and expected the voters in a presidential

primary to validate Eisenhower. However, come 1956 President Eisenhower didn't even bother to put his name on Montana's presidential primary ballot. As a result, the 1959 legislature repealed the presidential primary which returned control to party insiders until 1976.

In 1973 Montana Democrats aggressively pursued a presidential primary process after the Democrat's winner-take-all county and state conventions approach led to disastrous statewide and national results in 1968 and 1972. I was with the Montana Democratic Party in 1973-74 when I partnered with my friend Pat Williams, a veteran of presidential politics, in drafting [Montana's current presidential primary law](#).

Republicans provided the opposition to 1974's presidential primary bill -- all 19 negative votes in the Senate were Republican; 39 of the 41 negative votes in the House were GOP. But the bill did pass and is still the law in Montana today.

Montana law makes optional the application of the presidential primary results on party delegate selection. The Montana Democratic Party has selected its delegates based upon the primary election results ever since, except for 1984, when the National Democratic Party forced a caucus system on Montana Democrats. The Montana Republican Party used the presidential primary much less frequently, but is planning to [bind their delegates to the presidential primary results in 2020](#).

The current national GOP effort to "fix" the process in favor of President Trump by eliminating presidential primaries poses an imminent threat to the voices of grassroots Montana Republicans. Will the Trump's minions succeed in muting the people's voice here in Montana? Keep an eye on that as the 2020 GOP coronation proceeds.

Evan Barrett lives in historic Uptown Butte after retiring following 47 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is an award-winning producer of Montana history videos who continues to write columns and commentaries and occasionally teaches Montana history.

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