

The New Hampshire Distortion: The US Primaries Begin

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That grand electoral ritual known as the US primaries has commenced. New Hampshire features, and on this occasion, customary uglies (Hillary Clinton) battle such new aspirants as Bernie Sanders, who has been deemed by Real Clear Politics to have a 53.3 percent lead to Clinton's 40.5 percent. Donald Trump also does battle with his counterparts, hoping to pull ahead of the GOP field.

Politics is not a science, contrary to the entire legions of individuals who have made tenured careers out of that misguided assumption. Pollsters and many pundits, like the politicians they predict to win, ought to disappear with them in loss. But New Hampshire has been deemed an important feature of the US presidential system, if for no other reason it is the first in line.

That it has such a disproportionate measure of importance can be gathered from its population, a mere 1.3 million people, and demographic make-up. A combination of accident and invention have served to push up this small state's importance. Weather proved to be that greatest of factors, held before the thaw had turned ice into mud.

Initially, the New Hampshire primary remained a fairly insignificant affair, hardly one to work a discomforting sweat over. New Hampshire delegates were part of a dull, seemingly inevitable procedure, sending their respective GOP and Democratic delegates to the national conventions. They did not vote directly for the presidential candidates by name, a process which changed in 1952 when Republican governor Sherman Adams instituted a presidential primary for a direct vote for the favoured candidate.

The Adams move was largely prompted by an obvious bias towards then candidate General Dwight D. Eisenhower. Eisenhower's victory was something of a defeat for the broader primary election process. But it brought Adams directly into the White House, becoming Eisenhower's chief assistant in directing the daily operations of his administration.

His role was so formidable, it prompted a popular, if somewhat uncharitable standing joke: "What if Adams should die and Eisenhower becomes President of the United States?"[1] Only the Vicuna Coat Affair, in which Adams accepted one such coat from a longtime friend Bernard Goldfine, tarnished the lustre of administrative supremacy.

The Democrats were caught off guard by this act of political creativeness. Harry S. Truman decided to treat it with contempt. The US Senator from Tennessee, Estes Kefauver, did no such thing and won against the incumbent president with some fanfare, making maximum photo mileage out of his victory. Truman's refusal to campaign for what he regarded as a

formality with little consequence saw him lose eight out of ten counties.

For all of that, Kefauver, provided something of an object lesson on enthusiasm in primaries, using it as a staging ground to win favourable delegates and obtain the maximum coverage for his positions. He chalked up more victories than not, losing only in Florida to Senator Richard Russell of Georgia and Averell Harriman in the District of Columbia. The Democratic Party machinery was stunned, and in the finest traditions of the Republic, did not let that popularity get in the way of their man, Adlai Stevenson.

For such curious reasons of electoral jockeying, New Hampshire's electors have been described in various circles as the aristocrats of the electoral process.[2] White picket candy and the media hunt for attractive backdrops assist. This is neat, settled America, reassured, comfortable and 94 percent white. And averse to raising taxes.

Conor Friedersdorf, writing in *The Atlantic*, suggests that, "The stereotypical Granite State dweller is a flinty, independent-minded Yankee." [3] Michael Barone, in a piece for the conservative American Enterprise Institute, detects the historical hand of Benning Wentworth, the governor of Hampshire from 1741 to 1766. The Wentworths would subsequently ensure the insulation of New Hampshire "from Massachusetts's Puritan busybodies - and from its customs and tax collectors." [4]

This betrays, if nothing else, an innate conservatism in the US political system, one that is designed in rooting out those with direct ties to that great phantasm of speculative governance known as "the people". The very language of sifting, sorting and ultimately restricting, is inherent in the electoral process, be it the convention delegates themselves, or the ultimate constitution of the Electoral College. The popular demagogues are supposedly zapped by that point.

This is sold otherwise, with primaries treated by some political commentators as the people's democratic toffee. Individuals such as Robert Longley write about the value primaries in the manner of a folksy meeting. "During the primaries... voters get to hear from several Republican and Democratic candidates, plus the candidates of third parties." Then, the next jaw-dropping suggestion that the process "provides a nationwide stage for the free and open exchange of all ideas and opinions - the foundation of the American form of participatory democracy." [5]

The froth and distillation of the US primary process ensures that such ideas and suggestions are far from free and certainly questionable on their openness. (Habituated, noisy lunacy and reactionary stances should not be confused with the same.) Fittingly, this process of scrutiny and entrenched distortion begins in New Hampshire, a place resident satirist P.J. O'Rourke would admit was "frankly, short on people who are black, gay, Jewish and Hispanic."

Whether this process yields the surprises some members of the electorate crave, the more likely result is that tradition - one created and consistently re-enforced - will hold. New Hampshire politicians have certainly been determined to maintain that primacy - whatever other states will do regarding the process, *that* state will always have first digs at deciding who eventually gets to the conventions. In an unequal process, they are the first ones to exaggerate that principle.

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Notes:

[1]

<http://www.nytimes.com/1986/10/28/obituaries/sherman-adams-is-dead-at-87-eisenhower-aide-left-under-fire.html>

[2] http://www.denverpost.com/perspective/ci_29480434/electoral-aristocrats-new-hampshire

[3]

<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/02/who-lives-in-new-hampshire-anyway/461895/>

[4] <https://www.aei.org/publication/how-history-shapes-the-new-hampshire-primary/>

[5] <http://usgvo.info/about.com/cs/politicalsystem/a/whyprimaries.htm>

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