



The Presidential Primary Sweeping Away Local Stakes

By Thad Beyle

On May 6, 1980, the voters of North Carolina cast ballots for presidential hopefuls and for state and local candidates. The presidential primary and the regular party primaries for North Carolina offices were lumped together into one grand day of voting.

Many political observers feel that such an election has a negative effect on the state's political system, that state and local primaries should be divorced from the presidential primary. A growing number of political scientists contend that the presidential sweepstakes in primary states has a nationalizing influence on state campaigns — obscuring local issues, setting up coattail effects, and dissipating available campaign money, workers, and media attention.

During the 1970s, the North Carolina General Assembly has vacillated on the issue. In 1971, the Legislature voted to hold the state's first presidential primary on the first Tuesday in May, 1972, to coincide with the regular party primaries for all national, state, and local positions. But this first combined primary apparently had sufficient negative effects to change

the legislators' minds. The General Assembly decided to move the 1976 presidential primary to March and delay the regular state and local primaries to mid-August.

This shift, however, only raised new problems. Separate primaries cost the taxpayers more. The August primary probably gave an advantage to incumbents with higher name recognition and added a hindrance to challengers who had to get out a high vote in the peak of vacation season. The split schedule also extended primary politics over too long a time.

So for 1980 the General Assembly switched back to the first model with a combined presidential and state primary in early May. Because of the nature of the presidential primary campaigns this year some of the problems encountered in 1972 were absent (availability of money and workers), but the nationalizing effect on issues was more apparent. The debates over Iran, Afghanistan, inflation and presidential competency often obscured issues that candidates for governor, lieutenant governor, and insurance commissioner raised. National and international issues will also influence state and local races in the fall general election. It is likely, therefore, that the 1981 General Assembly will again debate proposals for changing the North Carolina primary so as to disentangle the national and state primary process.

Changes in the presidential nominating process during the last decade have made state primaries the

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key element in selecting the Democratic and Republican candidates. In 1968, only 14 states held a presidential primary; this year, 34 states sponsored such a vote — a 143 percent increase in 12 years. The nationalizing effect of this trend has spread across the country, not just into North Carolina.

The solution to the problem of combined national and local primaries seems to lie in changing the state election process to the off-presidential years. Some states have moved elections to even-numbered years in which there are no national contests, and have extended state executives' terms from two to four years, so that state and national elections would never fall on the same year. Others have shifted state elections to odd-numbered years, which accommodates states like North Carolina that elect state legislators biennially. Such a transition is difficult politically, since an extra election becomes necessary, but it can be accomplished. Illinois, for example, recently switched state elections to the even-numbered, off-presidential years. Illinoisans voted in a general election in 1976 for two-year terms. But no other state which switched years has had to hold an extra election. (See chart).

Some states began to implement this solution about the time others, such as North Carolina, were instituting a presidential primary. During the 1968-1980 period, when presidential primaries increased from 14 to 34, eight states switched their local elections to off years. In 1968, 21 states ran combined elections: by 1980, only 13 — including North Carolina — still conducted combined presidential and state primary voting.

Shifting the state elections to off-presidential years could have significant positive results:

*State and national issues and personalities could be more effectively separated and voters could focus on just one set of issues instead of two;

*The media would be able to maintain a steadier and more consistent focus on state or national issues and campaigns;

*Candidates, contributors, workers, observers, and voters would not be torn by competing national and state interests and loyalties; and

*The "coattails effect" of national political personalities would be minimized in state elections.

In North Carolina, the General Assembly could consider holding state-level elections in 1984 for limited (two-year) terms, followed by elections in 1986 and thereafter for regular terms for governor, lieutenant governor, and council of state positions. The General Assembly could restrict those who seek offices with limited terms (governor, lieutenant governor) to six years in office (1984-90) or to ten years, the short term and two full terms.

This system would still require state legislators, who have two-year terms, to run on presidential election years. To remove all conflicts, the General Assembly could vote to hold future elections in odd-numbered years. The phase-in period similar to the one described

above could be determined for off-year, even-numbered years.

National and state political observers are decrying the decline of the political party and the rise of personality and media politics. The increasing use of the presidential primary might well have significantly reduced the importance of state parties and their leadership. Separating the presidential and state level contests could help resist any further declines in state political parties. Whether this change would allow state parties to recover lost ground, however, is not clear, especially in North Carolina where personality and factional politics predominate.

Before the General Assembly shuffles the primaries around again, serious attention should be given to new ways — tried and proven in other states — of disentangling federal and state politics and campaigns. Changing the state's electoral calendar would allow candidates, campaign workers, political reporters, and most importantly, the voters, to focus on real, local issues rather than overwhelming, less-controllable national and international situations.

States Switching State Level Elections To Non-Presidential Years — 1948-1968-1980*

1948-1968 (11)

Colorado
Connecticut
Florida
Georgia
Maine
Massachusetts
Michigan
Minnesota
Nebraska
Ohio
Tennessee

1968-1980 (8)

Arizona
Illinois
Iowa
Kansas
New Mexico
South Dakota
Texas
Wisconsin

* All but Illinois also switched from two year terms to four year terms for Governors and hence did not have to hold an extra election.