

Democrats propose new primary schedule with South Carolina first

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The rules and bylaws committee of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) voted Friday to reorder the early primaries in the Democratic presidential nominating campaign in 2024, putting South Carolina first, removing Iowa from the list, and adding Michigan and Georgia.

The replacement of Iowa by South Carolina, in particular, seems motivated largely by racial politics. Both states have voted for Republican presidential candidates in recent years and have Republican-dominated state governments and congressional delegations. However, Iowa is regarded as “too white” by DNC operatives, while the Democratic Party electorate in South Carolina is predominately African American.

The proposal is not final, but must be approved by a full meeting of the DNC set for early February. Given that state legislatures, not the DNC, set the primary dates in most states, the calendar proposed by the DNC subcommittee is hardly definitive. Nonetheless, the proposal, sent to the DNC by President Joe Biden, has considerable political significance.

Under this plan, the first five presidential primaries in 2024, before the massive, coast-to-coast, “Super Tuesday” primaries, would begin with South Carolina on February 3, Nevada and New Hampshire on February 6, Georgia on February 13, and Michigan on February 27. No caucuses, like those traditionally held in Iowa and Nevada, would be permitted, only primaries with secret-ballot votes cast at polling places.

Both the calendar and the ban on caucuses are aimed at reinforcing the authority of the party apparatus and the White House over the process of selection. This would be critical in any year where there was not an incumbent president seeking renomination—possibly in 2024, if Biden, now 80, is not a candidate for

reelection, and certainly in 2028.

Iowa has long been the most wide open and unpredictable of contests, since the caucus structure and the lengthy campaign in a small rural state allow a candidate with little money or name recognition to build support. Biden finished a poor fifth in Iowa in 2020, and the counting of the caucus votes was disrupted by a software failure that delayed results for more than a week.

Biden was the candidate overwhelmingly favored by the party establishment, particularly against Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders. He was only able to overcome the Iowa results, and subsequent losses to Sanders in New Hampshire and Nevada, with a comfortable win in South Carolina. This was thanks to all-out support from the state party machine controlled by Representative Jim Clyburn, the only Democrat elected to federal office in the state and the third-ranking Democrat in the House of Representatives.

Moving South Carolina to first place is not merely a matter of rewarding Clyburn and the state party for services rendered, however. In an interview Friday on National Public Radio, Clyburn claimed that he had not asked for South Carolina to go first, only that it retain its place among the first group of primaries. Biden had made that proposal on his own, Clyburn said, and it was something of a surprise.

The most important element in bringing forward South Carolina in the order of primaries was the promotion of identity politics, particularly in regard to race. As in many southern states, the majority of Democratic voters in South Carolina are African American, and the primary reveals the extent to which a candidate has support in the black political establishment.

South Carolina was critical in 2008, when Barack

Obama defeated Hillary Clinton by landslide margins and took the lead in the contest for the nomination, and decisive in 2020, when Biden also won by a landslide and was immediately declared the front-runner, although it was his only victory among the first four state contests.

The other four states in the first five, under Biden's proposal, were "battleground" states in 2020 and are expected to be so again in 2024. Only South Carolina was completely dominated by the Republican Party, with a Republican governor, two Republican senators, and a House delegation consisting of six Republicans and one Democrat—Clyburn, whose district has been gerrymandered to include the most heavily African American areas of the state.

Neither Bill Clinton nor Barack Obama nor Biden came close to winning South Carolina in the general election. The state has voted for the Republican candidate in the last 11 presidential elections, and 14 out of the last 15—every election but one since the onset of the civil rights struggles for black equality. The only exception was in 1976, when Jimmy Carter of neighboring Georgia was the Democratic candidate. That makes the state's outsized role in the selection of a Democratic presidential nominee all the more problematic.

Clyburn openly discussed the racial considerations involved in putting South Carolina first in his interview with NPR, when he was asked why a state where the Democrats were not competitive in the general election should be placed first among the primaries.

"You look at the Democratic electorate in the general election," he said. "All of those people up in Philadelphia, up in New York, up in Detroit, they came from the South. The majority of African Americans in this country still live in the South. And I think that that's where we make the big mistake. What's going on now? Everybody looking at Georgia. Georgia is in the South. It was Georgia that gave the Democrats their majority in the Senate. That's nothing to be sneezed at."

Clyburn also acknowledged that the final order of the state primaries was far from being determined, since the DNC did not control the decisions of state legislatures. New Hampshire has a state law requiring that its primary be scheduled "first in the nation." Other states have less restrictive provisions, but still must take action, and Republicans control state government in

New Hampshire, South Carolina and Georgia, and a Republican governor was elected in Nevada. Only Michigan among the five states has a state government entirely controlled by the Democrats.

In the event that a state does not comply with the DNC calendar, the committee will impose penalties on candidates who campaign in "rogue" primaries, including depriving them of all or a sizeable portion of their delegates (which was done in 2008), or banning them from participation in DNC-sponsored debates, which would be a severe sanction for less well-known candidates.



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