

The Meddling Media

... for democracy's sake , punt the punditry and let voters decide

by David H. Schanzer

One satisfying result of the New Hampshire primary was the embarrassment suffered by pundits, analysts and pollsters whose predictions of the Democratic results turned out to be dead wrong. These unaccountable actors have accrued far too much power in our presidential nominating process. It is high time for the news media to return to the time-honored tradition of reporting on elections instead of actively shaping their outcome.

The advent of popular primaries in the mid-20th century democratized the nomination process, yet regrettably the trend over the past 20 years has been more condensed schedules, quicker decisions and diminished public participation. While the political parties deserve much of the blame for designing the process, the way the media cover elections is making matters even worse. A focus on the horse-race aspect of elections -- who is the "front-runner," who has "momentum" -- has often had the snowball effect of becoming a self-fulfilling prophesy.

In recent elections, the candidates who win the early caucuses and primaries are designated by the media as "unstoppable," which dries up the other challengers' funding and brings the process to a premature conclusion. This is unhealthy for our democracy.

Coverage of the current election shows how the media have aggrandized their own power while losing sight of the importance of actual voters. After all, the purpose of the primaries and caucuses is to select delegates to this summer's party nominating conventions. On the Democratic side, a candidate needs 2,025 delegates to win; on the Republican side, 1,191.

In the Iowa caucuses, Barack Obama's "huge" win netted him all of 16 delegates, 0.7 percent of what is needed to secure the nomination; Hillary Clinton's "devastating" loss garnered her 15 delegates. Yet, the media set up New Hampshire as "do or die" for Clinton, even though a tiny sliver (about 350,000) of America's 142 million registered voters had cast a ballot, huge delegate-rich states would not be voting until next month and Clinton still held leads in the national polls.

Realistic but less sensational coverage would have noted that Iowa was an initial test of strength for the candidates, but relatively unimportant compared to the larger states yet to vote. Covering the election this way, however, would reduce the media's influence in choosing a nominee and, therefore, that is not the type of coverage we see.

Instead the political chattering class, based on these early results, opines on which candidates are "viable," which ones should drop out of the race and what candidates must do to "stay competitive."

For example, the pundits claim Tuesday's Michigan primary is a "must win" for Mitt Romney after two second-place finishes in Iowa and New Hampshire. But why? He currently leads in delegates and could enter the convention with the most delegates if he continues to place second in primaries across the country. Yet some have labeled Romney as a "loser" who must show he can "win," even though you get no extra delegates by winning a close race. (You wouldn't know it from the coverage, but both Clinton and Obama won nine delegates in New Hampshire).

The pundits have already concluded that John Edwards cannot win the nomination and so should pack up and go home. But Edwards has won 52 delegates, just 26 behind Obama. If Clinton and Obama continue to split votes and Edwards comes into the convention with 500 or so delegates (which could easily happen under the Democrats' proportional representation system), he could emerge as an alternative nominee, play the power broker or take the vice presidential nomination again.

Who knows now what will happen in July or, for that matter, when South Carolina Democrats vote Jan. 26?

While the media haven't created this crazy system where two small unrepresentative states go first, they are responsible for failing to put the relative unimportance of these early races into context and for inserting so much opinion and speculation into "news" coverage.

We are in the midst of a historically important and exciting election with no clear front-runner in either party. There are barrier-breaking candidacies on the Democratic side and a wide array of candidates duking it out among Republicans. It would be good for our democracy if, as former NBC anchor Tom Brokaw so wisely put it, the media would "wait for the voters to make their judgment."

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