Military Voters Lose Out as States Race to Be First in Presidential Primaries

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7.0—Military Voting Rights

The process of selecting delegates to the Democratic and Republican Party nominating conventions starts earlier each cycle. New Hampshire (with the first primary) and Iowa (with the first caucus) insist on being first. They like the attention, and all the campaign workers and reporters generate a lot of business for local hotels and restaurants. Other states are afraid of missing out—of holding their primaries after the nominee has already effectively been selected. As other states move up their primaries, Iowa and New Hampshire move their contests still earlier. It is likely that the opening rounds of the 2012 nominating process will be held before 2011 is over.

My concern is that this race to be first will result in the disenfranchisement of the brave young men and women who are away from home and prepared to lay down their lives in defense of our country, in our nation’s armed forces. Because of their service to the nation, they cannot come home to vote in primaries or elections. If they are to vote at all, it must be by absentee ballot.

Absentee voting has always been difficult for military personnel—there often is not enough time for the ballot to go from the local election official to the voter and back in time for the ballot to be counted. As states race to hold their primaries earlier in the year, the ballot transmission time problem can only get worse.

I also urge the state legislatures and state party organizations to select national convention delegates by primary, rather than caucus. The 9,081 Iowans serving on active duty will almost certainly be disenfranchised in the Iowa caucuses—their military service precludes them from coming home to participate. Earlier this year, I sent an e-mail to Matthew N. Strawn, the Chairman of the Republican Party of Iowa. I urged him to consider means to enable Hawkeye State service members to participate in the selection of the Republican presidential nominee.

Mr. Strawn did not respond to me, but when Politico (the newspaper for political junkies here in Washington and around the country) picked up on this story, Mr. Strawn promised to direct the Republican State Central Committee to review how the voting rights of military personnel might be accommodated. I am anxiously awaiting a report on the results of that review.

[1] President Obama will almost certainly be unopposed for the Democratic Party nomination for President in 2012.