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Political process worked — this time, anyway

By MICHAEL NEBLO and CHAD FLANDERS

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Earlier this year, we seemed headed toward a primary election debacle: States were stepping over themselves to be the first primary or caucus, pushing the start of the presidential primary season to Jan. 3, the earliest it has ever been. Michigan and Florida even moved up the dates of their primaries at the risk of losing their delegates to the national convention, causing a big headache for themselves and the Democrats in the process.

Pundits and scholars worried that by having a national super primary, we would have Democratic and Republican nominees before anyone started paying attention. The result would be a long, drawn-out (and boring) general election, where two unvetted candidates interminably went at each other.

The disaster has not happened this year. Instead, we have had what many consider the most exciting primary season in recent memory. Although the race between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton runs the risk of being long and drawn out, people have not (yet) tuned out - even when it looks almost certain that Obama will be the eventual nominee.

And even the Republican primary process, which picked John McCain what feels like ages ago, had its share of drama, as Mitt Romney, Mike Huckabee and McCain took turns in the lead.

In terms of voter turnout, media attention and almost every other measure, the front-loading of the primaries seems to have caused little trouble, and the pundits' worrying and hand-wringing seem to have been premature. Perhaps we should turn our attention to a more pressing debate about the role of so-called superdelegates?

Not so fast. The increased voter attention seems to be in spite of, rather than because of, the new way of doing primaries. The reason front-loading worked is that two celebrities - Obama and Clinton - were the leading candidates for the Democratic nomination. Only Clinton, with her former presidential husband and her fund-raising prowess as well as her natural tenacity, could have lasted this long in the face of Obama's early victories. All other candidates were pretty much relegated to footnote status after Iowa, and had Obama won New Hampshire (which looked like it would happen), we would have seen a very early end to the Democratic primary.

The fact is that this year's primaries were saved by celebrity: Obama's remarkable story and the possibility of a Clinton restoration. With two Democratic superstars running for president, what could have been a very short and early primary season was turned into captivating drama. We should consider ourselves lucky. But we shouldn't let this deter us from serious thinking about the way we choose our presidential candidates.

Should we keep what we have now, basically a de facto national primary, which in most years would favor the most well-known and well-funded candidate against the newcomer or the one who has ideas, but not money? And should New Hampshire and Iowa, states that are unrepresentative of the national interest, still be allowed to have an inordinate weight in picking our candidates, simply because they petulantly refuse to take turns? Do we want an early end to the primaries followed by a general election season that lasts eleven months?

These are serious questions, and they deserve serious thought. We might not be so lucky with our candidates the next time around.

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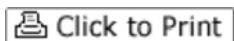
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