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## Early Primary Jumble Benefits Romney

By: Alex M. Parker

### Florida, other states' impatience with primary schedule could lead to an early contest, giving Romney yet another edge

Just like four years ago, the GOP primary schedule is a mess. States continue to try to edge past each other to earlier in the race, and now the prospect of the first 2012 contest occurring in late 2011 is a distinct, if still improbable, possibility.

The biggest beneficiary of this squabble among the states could be former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, the party's apparently enduring front-runner.

The confusion results, as in past years, from building resentment among other states at New Hampshire and Iowa's hallowed status as the first two contests in the nation. On Friday, a special committee of appointees by Florida's governor and legislature voted to hold that state's primary on January 31, despite the possibility of sanctions from the national party. Florida likely won't bypass New Hampshire--Senior Republican National Committee officials on Friday made it clear that Florida will likely lose 50 percent of its delegates at the national convention, and that any other states which aim to jump the timeline will also face the same punishment. But the Sunshine State did want to challenge the GOP's rule that only four states (New Hampshire, Iowa, Nevada, and South Carolina) could host contests before March 6. Florida is too diverse, and too important in the November general election, to wait that long, Florida officials argue.

Even if it is punished by the national committee, Florida could succeed in diminishing the designated early states. According to a national party rule, New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Nevada would face a similar 50 percent reduction in delegates if they moved their contests to January. (Currently, New Hampshire's primary is tentatively scheduled for Feb. 14, Nevada's caucus for Feb. 18, and South Carolina's for Feb. 28 .) Iowa wouldn't face a penalty for moving its caucuses up (from the tentatively scheduled Feb. 6. ) because its caucus rules technically don't award delegates to candidates until later. The scrambled primary process would likely mean a sped up schedule of early

contests, with the first possibly occurring as early as January 3 or even in December, followed by a long lull until the next round of primaries and caucuses towards the end of February and early March.

[See a slideshow of the GOP contenders.]

A compressed primary calendar benefits former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney

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in several ways. It gives less time for challengers to blunt his momentum. Texas Gov. Rick Perry, for example, would only have three months to get his campaign off the ground. Possible later entrants like New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, and former Govs. Sarah Palin of Alaska and Mike Huckabee of Arkansas, would face even more daunting sprints. With his current momentum following good debate performances and with Perry's campaign failing to catch fire, Romney has the best chance to not only win a batch of early, important primaries, but to also slog on for the primaries afterwards. "His campaign is built for long haul, so a muddle benefits him most," said Michael Tanner, a political analyst with the conservative Cato Institute. Furthermore, Florida is a state where Romney has a clear advantage. Though technically below the Mason-Dixon line, its moderate--and more crucially, older--voters who may be spooked by Perry's stances on Social Security have given Romney substantial leads in that state, according to polls.

After Florida's contest at the end of January, the next primaries would come in Arizona and Michigan on Feb. 28, though those two states would also face penalties from the Republican National Committee for holding their contests a week early. The two states could split, with the southwestern Arizona siding with Perry, and Michigan, where Romney was born and where his father was governor in the 1960s, siding with Romney. But if Romney already has an edge from earlier primary victories, he may be able to win both states, giving him a great deal of momentum heading into the big contests in March.

[See pictures of the GOP candidates on the campaign trail.]

RNC officials don't feel that they've allowed the calendar to be front-loaded. They point to a new rule requiring any contest before April 1 to be proportional, rather than "winner-takes-all." So front-runners won't be able to knock out their challengers early on, as other candidates will pick up delegates from races that they lose. It's one of the reasons why the Democratic primary lasted so long in 2008, and RNC officials say it will make sure more voters across the country get their say.

Political observers can debate whether this piecemeal process, with each state jockeying for position and no national entity able to set a definitive calendar, is a wise way to decide who should be the leader of the free world. In the meantime, candidates are getting ready for a tough contest that will be even faster than they expected.

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